

THE BUSINESS, TECHNOLOGY & ART OF ANIMATION AND VFX

June |
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ANIMATIONTM MAGAZINE

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issue

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**Plus
Over the Moon,
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and Much More**

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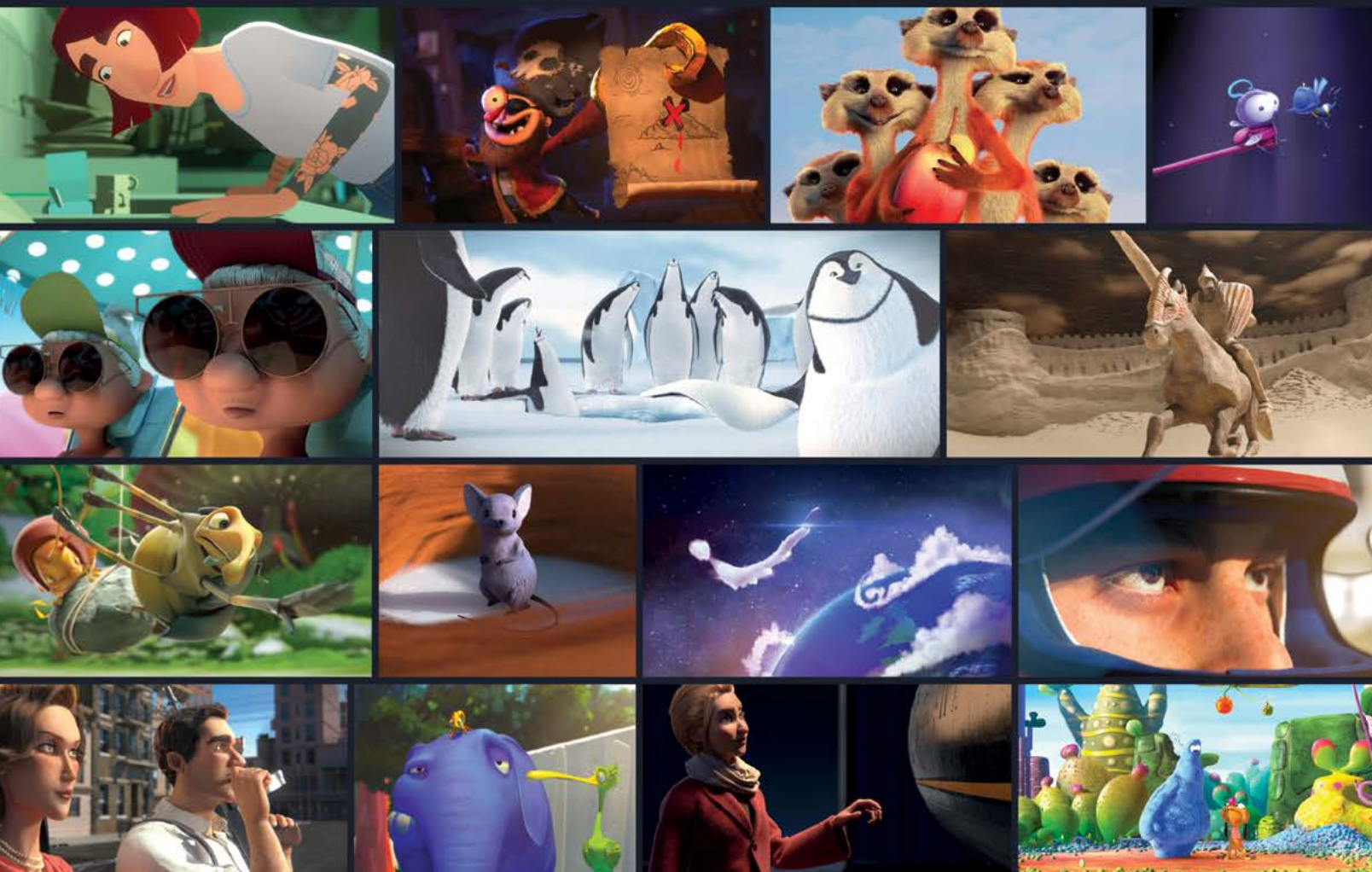
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ANIMATION ^{300th issue} MAGAZINE TM

*Revisiting the Life
Aquatic with the
New SpongeBob
SquarePants Movie*

*Animation Stars'
Stay-at-Home Tips*

*Plus,
Over the Moon,
Close Enough,
Artemis Fowl
and Much More*

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**A Sublime Spoof of
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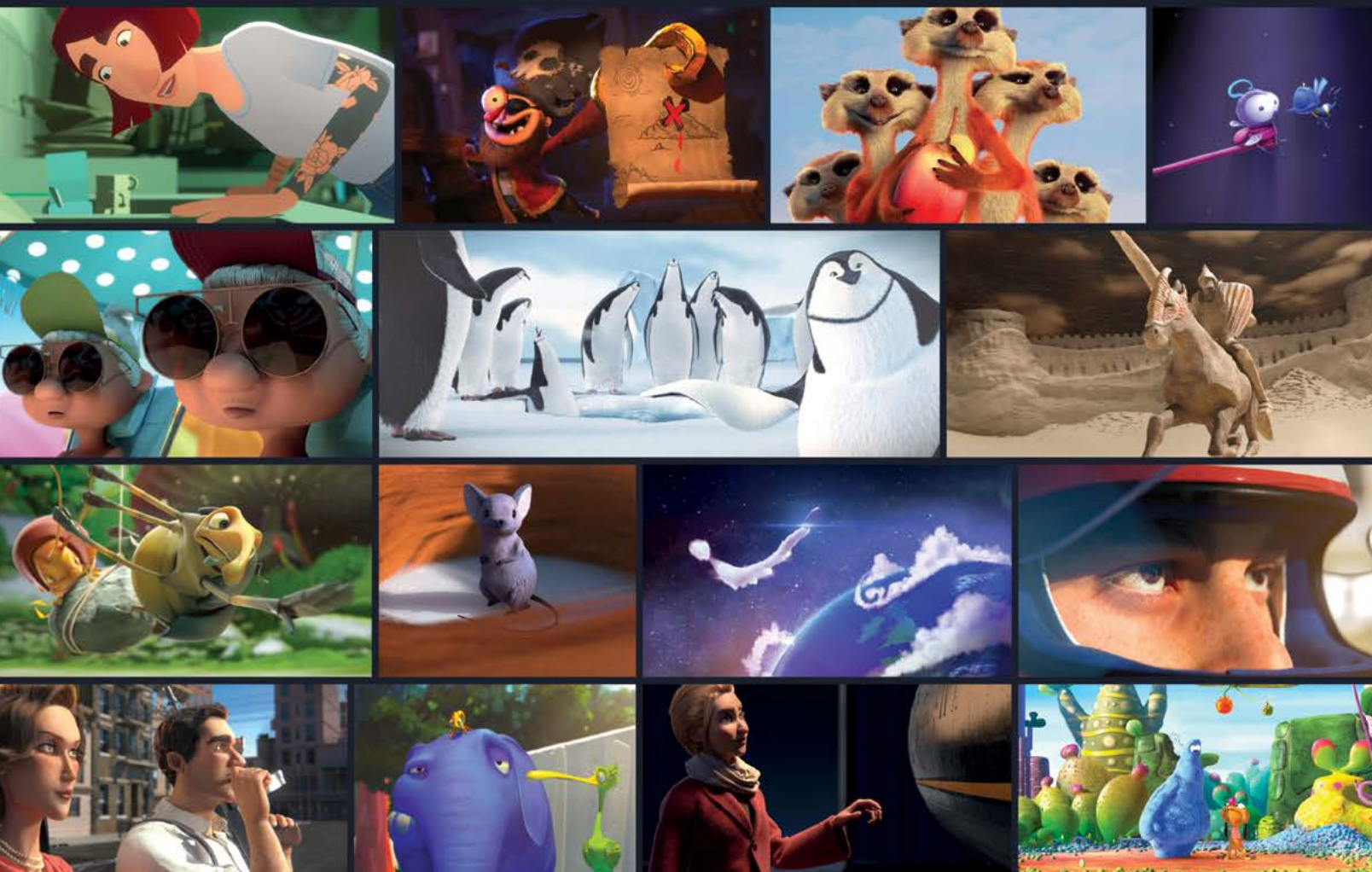
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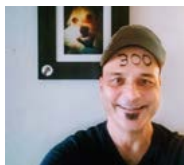
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EDITOR'S NOTE



When the first issue of *Animation Magazine* was published by its founder Terry Thoren in August of 1987, the toon landscape was vastly different from what we're familiar with today. The top-grossing animated movies of the year were *The Chipmunk Adventure* (which made a whopping \$6.8 million at the box office), *The Care Bear Adventures in Wonderland* (\$6 million) and *The Brave Little Toaster* (\$2.3 million). Meanwhile, TV audiences were just being introduced to shows such as the *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*, *DuckTales* and *Mighty Mouse: The New Adventures*.

There hundred issues later, we continue to cover the best and most inspiring animated TV shows, movies, shorts, VR projects and VFX-driven titles. It's more difficult to feature all the wonderful animated content that is available to aficionados and general audiences alike each and every day. Thankfully, we now have our daily website and social media outlets to spread the news on all the fantastic work that is being created all around the world.

We were very happy to have SpongeBob SquarePants, one of the most iconic animated characters of the past 21 years as our cover guy for this special issue. This is the fourth time that Stephen Hillenbert's hilariously optimistic sponge has graced the cover of our magazine, and I can't think of a more fitting icon to help us get through these tough COVID-era months. If there is one character that can face adversity with his endless charms, silly humor and crackpot plans, it's our yellow, absorbent friend. We are also honored to be one of the first to offer you a sneak preview of his new Paramount feature.

One of the big highlights of the past few weeks was reading about how some of our favorite animation superstars are spending their time in isolation. We were so pleased to hear back from the likes of Jennifer Lee, Pete Docter, Sergio Pablos and so many others for our special quarantine feature. You'll definitely need to read their tips for the next time you want to binge a new show at home with your family. We definitely packed a lot in this summer preview issue: From interviews with veterans such as Glen Keane, J.J. Sedelmaier and Pierre Sissmann, to special behind-the-scenes stories on new the shows *Close Enough* and *Crossing Swords* and Disney's *Artemis Fowl*, there is truly something for everyone.

One thing that is still as true today as it was over three decades ago is that we would not be here without the constant support of all you readers and the generosity of all the prolific studios and entities we cover. On behalf of our tireless publisher and president Jean Thoren and everyone at *Animag*, I just wanted to take this opportunity to share our gratitude with you all during this especially challenging year. We consider ourselves very fortunate to be your connection with the animation and vfx world.

I'll leave you with three of my favorite SpongeBob quotes: 1. "Can I be excused for the rest of my life?" 2. "Remember it is illegal to lick doorknobs on other planets." and 3. "The best time to wear a striped sweater ... is all the time!" And if you get disheartened, don't give up: Just ask yourself, "What would SpongeBob do?"

Ramin

Ramin Zahed
Editor in Chief
ramin@animationmagazine.net

QUOTE OF THE MONTH

"I've been a fan of *Adult Swim* shows since my teens, so I'm thrilled to bring my beloved fowl to the party and be a new voice for a fresh decade of absurd, irreverent, yet heartwarming adult animation."

— *Tuca & Bertie* creator Lisa Hanawalt, after her acclaimed show was picked up by Adult Swim following cancellation by Netflix after one season.



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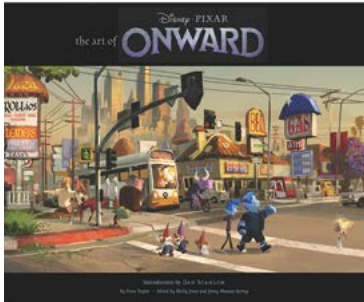
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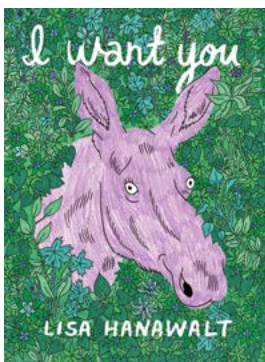
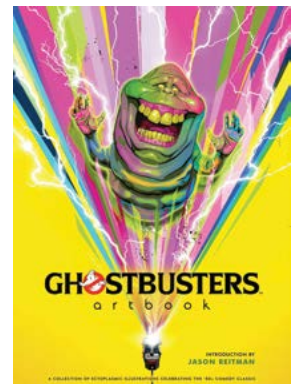
Breezy Reads for Hot Summer Days

By Mercedes Milligan



The Art of Onward. [Chronicle Books, \$40] We haven't had a chance to talk up the latest beautiful Pixar art tome since its release in March — but what better way to recollect the temporarily abandoned joy of watching a beautifully animated epic unfold on the big screen? Penned by Drew Taylor with a foreword from the film's director, Dan Scanlon, this hardcover edition brings the elf brothers' incredible quest through a suburban fantasy world to life in an all-new, vibrant way, with character designs, storyboards, colorscripts and more. Plus, exclusive interviews with *Onward's* creative team. If you've already picked up this title, consider heading to chroniclebooks.com to pre-order *The Art of Soul* in anticipation of the studio's next thrilling original (pub date Oct. 20).

Ghostbusters: Artbook. [Insight Editions/Printed in Blood, \$40] Who you gonna call? (Well, hopefully your local independent bookstore — they could use the support right now!) If you're haunted by the need for more amazing pop culture-inspired art in your life, this is the hardcover for you. Printed in Blood's exclusive, fully-illustrated celebration of the iconic film franchise features hundreds of unique pieces from creators all over the world in one ectoplasmic jackpot. The 200+ pages are packed with loving homages to Slimer, Gozer, the Stay Puft Marshmallow Man and of course the super spectre-snatching crew. Contributors include Rian Hughes, Erin Hunting, Jerry Ma and many, many more.



I Want You. [Drawn and Quarterly, \$22] With the exciting news that Adult Swim is giving Lisa Hanawalt's sassy squawkers Tuca & Bertie a new nest for Season 2, it's the perfect time to treat yourself to a pre-order of the brilliant cartoonist's upcoming minicomic compendium. Created before Hanawalt burst into animation with *Bolack Horseman* and *Tuca & Bertie*, or made a splash with her bestselling novel *Coyote Doggirl*, these panels won fans (and an Ignatz Award) for their outlandish humor, sharp wit and giddy balance between all that's beautiful and repulsive in our wonderful, effed up world. [August 18]

The Art of The Dragon Prince. [Dark Horse Books/Wonderstorm Studios, \$40] Also on our wish list for the dog days is an in-depth look at the hit Netflix animated fantasy series, presenting never-before-seen concept sketches, early designs and first impressions from the first three seasons. Assembled in consultation with series creators Aaron Ehasz (writer, *Avatar: The Last Airbender*) and Justin Richmond and exec producer Justin Santistevan, this 200+ page dive into the show's incredible world will be available in both hardcover and digital (\$24) formats. [August 18] ♦



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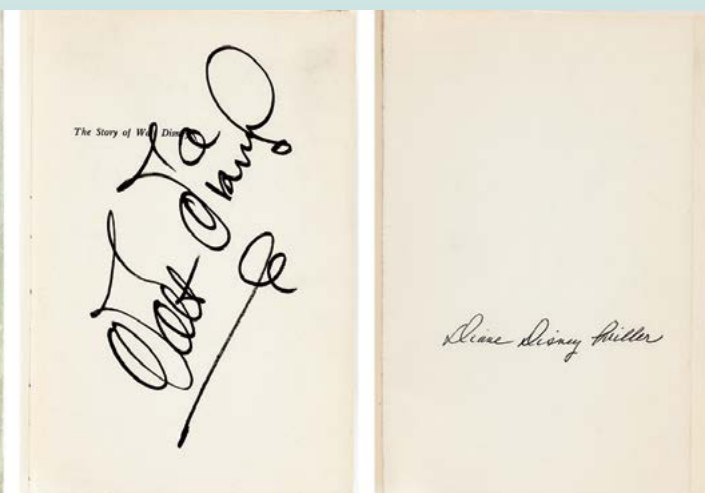
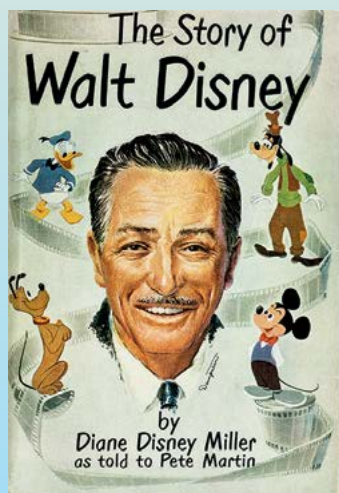
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Tale of a Sponge and His Missing Snail

Writer/director Tim Hill gives us the early scoop on the much-anticipated, CG-animated *The SpongeBob Movie: Sponge on the Run*.

There are not many animated characters that can still inspire the kind of devotion *SpongeBob SquarePants* does after 12 successful seasons on the air and two hit movies. Created by Stephen Hillenburg, who died in 2018 after a battle with ALS, the beloved yellow character and his Bikini Bottom pals are ready for another feature adventure this summer in *The SpongeBob Movie: Sponge on the Run*.

The new outing centers on SpongeBob's search for his lost pal, Gary the Snail, who has been abducted by King Poseidon. Along the way, SpongeBob and Patrick (voiced hilariously as usual by Tom Kenny and Bill Fagerbakke) travel to the lost city of Atlantis to track down the good gastropod. In addition to Kenny and Fagerbakke, the movie also features the rest of the show's original voice cast (Roger Bumpass, Clancy Brown, Mr. Lawrence, Jill Talley, Carolyn Lawrence) as well as some surprising live-action star turns from Snoop Dogg, Keanu Reeves, Awkwafina and Reggie Watts.

This third movie in the *SpongeBob* cinematic experience is animated by the team at Montre-

al-based Mikros Image, and is co-written and directed by Tim Hill, a veteran of the TV show and the first *SpongeBob* movie, whose credits also include *Garfield: A Tale of Two Kitties* (2006), *Alvin and the Chipmunks* (2007), *Hop* (2011) and *Grumpy Cat's Worst Christmas Ever* (2014).

Hill, who met Hillenburg when they were both working on *Rocko's Modern Life* in the early '90s, says he was drawn to the new movie because of its clever storyline and characters.

The director met up with a group of *SpongeBob* series veterans and Hillenburg to explore fresh ideas for a third movie featuring the character. "I was asked to put together an outline, and then asked to take a stab at the script, and

and simple stories. I think the previous script was a bit too far-fetched. So we opted for this story which is about SpongeBob losing Gary as he's kidnapped by a very vain King Poseidon (voiced by British comic Matt Berry) who uses snails to make his skin shiny and young."

An Homage to Hillenburg

The director says the film's story is very relatable as everyone can identify with losing a pet or a good friend. "I think it has a great theme and is built as an homage to Steve Hillenburg," he notes. "Everyone comes together to help SpongeBob because of all the things he has done for them. We thought in a way it's about

what this character has meant to people over the years. It's a celebration of creativity and humor, and by extension, it's an homage to

"In a way, the movie is a celebration of creativity and humor, and by extension, an homage to what Steve [Hillenburg] gave to all of us during his lifetime."

— Writer-director Tim Hill



eventually they asked me to direct the movie," recalls Hill. "The studio had plans for a different version of the movie, but that one was scrapped. Steve was always a fan of grounded, relatable

what Steve gave to all of us during his lifetime. That's why I wanted to do the movie, because there was something deeply personal about it, which goes beyond just having a great story

Under the Sea: The creative team behind the third *SpongeBob* movie revisited the first few seasons of the popular Nickelodeon show to stay true to the roots of the characters.



and memorable characters.”

Hill says he cherishes some great memories of working, hanging out and going to the movies with Hillenburg. “I met him when we were both in our 20s. When I look back, it’s Steve’s art and sense of humor that really stand out for me. I loved his perspective and ironic sense of humor. He loved art and movies. We used to catch revivals of movies of the silent classics ... Buster Keaton, Harold Lloyd, Charlie Chaplin. We went to animation retrospectives, National Film Board of Canada shorts. He would play guitar and we would all jam in his office. He painted, too. He was a real Renaissance man.”

The helmer says in the earlier stages of development, there were questions about whether to take the traditional 2D approach or push for a CG-animated movie that wouldn’t “break” the look audiences associate with *SpongeBob*. “Sometimes, I feel that CG doesn’t always serve human characters very well,” says the director. “During our development period, we took a lot of time looking at old clips from the first

SpongeBob movie and translating them to CG. We tried a lot of approaches, but I think we ended up with a great solution. It feels a little bit like stop-motion; it’s snappy and more forgiving than general CG. It’s like film animation, we did it on ones and twos (one frame of film per movement or two frames of film). In that way we got the animation to look similar to what we’re used to on the show.”

Mikros Magic

To animate the project, the studio tapped Mikros Image Animation (*Captain Underpants: The First Epic Movie*, *The Little Prince*) with the production mainly done in the Montreal studio. “It was a bit of a learning curve because they are a digital studio and they don’t come from a 2D world,” says Hill. “We were looking for snappy animation, because it’s more comedic that way. We took the time to get everybody up to speed with the style. One of the show’s original timers went to Montreal to help them with the timing, and they got pretty good.”

According to Hill, the film’s background also presented some challenges since a lot of the show’s sets were more graphic. “For example, a wall would be just a color, but we had to make it all dimensional and put lighting on it and make it a little tactile and real. We had to do stuff with the lighting like caustic and atmosphere and rays coming from the surface to keep it feel like the water is moving round and affecting the plant life. All of those things give it a little verisimilitude and give you this feeling that they all live in a fish tank.”

Of course, there is always the issue of how to make a CG-animated version of the characters look and feel like their 2D counterparts. As Hill explains, “We had to be very subtle with our character modeling and surfacing. For example, we had to figure out how to treat *SpongeBob*’s shadow side: Does it go green like it does on the show? We had to be careful with the way *SpongeBob*’s flat top can become too angular if you use the wrong lens. Or take *Plankton*: He is a kind of a cell organism, so you have to have



caption

transparency, but also a little bit of a wet surface. It's all about dialing it in until it looks right. You just know when it looks right."

Hill also points out how important the overall colors of the movie were in the whole process. "*SpongeBob* is such a vibrant show, but in this CG world, the colors get saturated very quickly, so we have to weed out a lot of the specularity," he notes. "You know, this is my first fully-animated feature, so I'm just telling you what I learned!"

Live-Action Surprises

The movie also features about 12 minutes of live-action footage. Hill says this was a strategy to give the audience something special, an element that would really make it a cinematic experience for everyone. "When you have a popular IP like *SpongeBob*, that has had so many episodes and two movies already, you have to think about things that will excite people and get them to come see it on the big screen."

Hill says it was a good thing that all the live-action footage, the animation and the dialog was done by the time the entertainment industry had to shut down because of COVID-19 pandemic precautions. "By the time you're done with the animation, it's usually just the director dealing with the editor, putting in new shots or adjusting them," he explains. "The movie was originally scheduled for May, so most of the work was done. It just made it a little hard to do real-time notes and editing and the music. But we were just doing the post stuff — final lighting, music, effects and dubbing. We got lucky!"

When asked about the timeless appeal of *SpongeBob*, Hill believes it's the intelligence, heart and playfulness at the core of the show that has made it such a phenomenal success over the years. "It's always about friendship and relationships," he says. "The show also comes up with creative solutions and surprising ways *SpongeBob* gets around things. The characters remind me of those wonderful silent movies in a way. They all work so well together. It's truly a wellspring that Steve created and gave the world." ♦

Paramount is scheduled to release *The SpongeBob Movie: Sponge on the Run* on August 7. The movie might be available on VOD if theaters remain closed due to the COVID-19 pandemic.



Building a Better Sponge!

Sponge on the Run's animation supervisor Jacques Daigle says he feels like he's been living in Bikini Bottom for the past 28 months. He and his team at Montreal's Mikros Animation have been working hard to make sure *SpongeBob* and his pals look as funny, cartoony and tactile in CG as they do in 2D. "We had all three first seasons of the series to look at to understand all the timing techniques," says the animation veteran, whose many credits include *Cloudy with a Chance of Meatballs*, *The Little Prince*, *The Smurfs 2*, *Mune: Guardian of the Moon* and *The Star*.

"One of the most important things for our team to understand was the timing techniques of the show, which is crucial in comedy," says Daigle. "Tim Hill and some of the other animation directors on the show trained us to really understand the timing. Our team at Mikros was very open and excited to make the project as honest as possible, and not try to reinvent anything."

Daigle, who worked with about 80 people in the animation department at the Montreal studio, says the most important thing was to ask the right questions about the final goal. "In terms of the designs of the camera in 3D, we really cheated to the camera a lot,"

he notes. "Comedy has to be in your face, so we ended up forcing the perspectives a lot. After all, *SpongeBob* is a square, so sometimes the top of his head would be hidden in CG. There's a comfort zone where you can add all your cheats and get away with it, and it doesn't become too noisy or questionable. It's



Squash & Stretch: The animators opted for a cartoony, loose CG interpretation of the characters.

funny, because the original show is in 2D, which is all about drawing to make the world look 3D — while we have a 3D movie, which we wanted to make look like a 2D show. It was a cyclical argument!"

"Because of perspectives and the camera, [*SpongeBob's*] back limbs looked smaller, for example, so we had to beef him up," adds Daigle. "*SpongeBob* is a different Bob in every single shot. We had to simply trust the system and the original rules we were given. Why use six poses when you can just use two or three poses in five seconds to make it work? You don't need that extra blink. We really tackled it as if we were working in hand animation. It was all about making it snappy and really understanding the language of *SpongeBob*. We used Maya, but we built a lot of specific tools for the movie, because there was a lot to figure out!"

Daigle says the whole experience was a great exercise in restraint for all the animators involved. "We are used to moving everything, but we just had to accept that we don't move everything all the time. Tim Hill was relying on us to provide the comedy in our animation. He would give us a slight nudge and we'd sit down and talk about how to make it as funny as possible. We were all so proud of working on this movie. It was such a special project, and every single one of us knew that this was an experience that we were all going to remember. It made us grow so much and become better as animators and as people." ♦



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A Lunar Voyage to Remember

Oscar-winning director Glen Keane offers us a sneak peek at his upcoming movie *Over the Moon*, which arrives on Netflix this fall.

Director Glen Keane's *Over the Moon*, a copro between Netflix and Shanghai-based Pearl Studio, is one of the most-anticipated movies of the fall season. Penned by the late writer Audrey Wells (*The Truth About Cats and Dogs*, *Under the Tuscan Sun*), the animated musical tells the inspiring story of a young girl named Fei Fei who builds a rocket ship to visit the Moon and meet a legendary Moon Goddess. Keane, who has worked on Disney classics such as *The Little Mermaid*, *Pocahontas*, *Aladdin*, *Beauty and the Beast* and *Tarzan* and won an Oscar for his collaboration with the late Kobe Bryant, *Dear Basketball*, was kind enough to offer us a first-look at his upcoming movie.

Animag: Although we have only seen a few drawings from *Over the Moon*, there is a lot of early buzz surrounding your new movie. Can you tell us a little bit about how you became involved with the project?

Glen Keane: It's interesting because we were supposed to offer a work-in-progress session about the movie at this year's Annecy Festival, and my involvement with the project began at

Annecy in 2017. I was giving a talk about thinking like a child and how the key to creative longevity is holding on to your childlike creativity, and believing that the impossible is possible. I found out later that sometime during my talk, Peilin Chou (CCO of Pearl Studio and former development exec at Disney) and Melissa Cobb (VP of Kids and Family at Netflix) leaned over to each other and said, "He has to direct this movie!"

The heroine of *Over the Moon* is a 12-year-old girl who builds a rocket to the Moon, and she reminded me so much of the other characters I had animated throughout my career. When my producer Gennie Rim and I read the script, we felt compelled to do it. This is Audrey Wells' swan song. [The screenwriter died in 2018 from cancer at the age of 58.] It tells such a beautiful story. So, this movie became one of the first animated projects set up at Netflix.

You have spoken a lot about your love for hand-drawn animation. How are you enjoying directing this CG-animated feature?

There was a moment where Peilin was saying,

we want you to make this movie your own, and we know you love hand-drawn. But after doing *Tangled* I realized how much drawing is infused in CG if you want it to be. It can be the foundation to everything that you do. So, we decided to take all the power of drawing and design, the beauty of the lighting and the design and colors and textures that CG can bring. We decided to do it in CG. Now I look at the film and cannot imagine that we could have done it any other way.

How is the work divided between the studios?

Gennie Rim: Most of our team right now is at Sony Pictures Imageworks in Vancouver. We are wrapping up the film there. In terms of Pearl Studio in Shanghai, most of our team were there during the early stages, vis-dev stage, helping out with the design and consulting throughout.

Glen Keane: It's a very international production. We have people in Holland, in Spain, France, Canada, China. It was truly a new model of doing animation not only internationally, but within a studio system — unique the way

Netflix and Pearl collaborated on this project.

What are some of the standout qualities of this movie that makes it special to you?

My favorite animated movie is *Peter Pan*: There's this wonderful moment when Peter Pan takes Wendy, Jonathan and Michael out of the window of their home, and they fly across London. That idea that you can fly has always been a big part for me. I have flying dreams! As I read the script, the idea of building a rocket to the Moon really captured my imagination.

When I was seven years old, I had a birthday party, and my dad told us, "I don't know if any of you might be interested, but I was talking to NASA and they've built a rocketship. It's all top secret, so I can't show it to you. But it's in our backyard and I can blindfold you and give each one of you a ride on it." So we were blindfolded and went outside, and sat in the cockpit and you could hear ground control talking as the rocket took off and you could feel the wind in your face. Then, we finally landed, my

mom took the blindfold off. My parents had set up a lawn chair and they had just carried us in the air. They

had used a ham radio to recreate the sound of the ground control. That was the most wonderful thing and I never forgot that experience.

I feel like animation is like that. It takes you on this ride that everyone is going to believe it. So much of the story in *Over the Moon* is like *Wizard of Oz*, and believing Dorothy goes up in the tornado and visits Oz. Our movie is the same kind of adventure that we want to take audiences on. I love the fantasy, the imagination, the desire to make believe, but deeper than that it was something that Audrey was writing from this deep, heartfelt need. Our main character is going to the Moon to meet a Moon Goddess, and just like Dorothy, she has to go through this experience to be able to deal with the problems she is facing at home.

Can you tell us a little bit about the movie's

visuals and your sources of inspiration for the overall look?

The movie has quite a unique look of its own. We went to China and spent time in these water towns, because we wanted the film to have an authentic look and have the qualities of the real world we were animating. Our production designer, Celine Desrumaux (*The Little Prince, Age of Sail*) had just returned from a backpacking trip through China. She fell in love with the textures and details of the real China, not the stereotypical ideas of what people imagined China to be.

In the second act of the movie, we are on the Moon. I showed Celine the cover of Pink Floyd's album *The Dark Side of the Moon*, where there is this white light hitting this prism and you see all these bright colors coming through. Celine created a world that was so unique and breathtaking that is pure color. The idea is that the world on Earth is reflected light, while the Moon world is all source light. Another influence was the work of Spanish artist Joan Miró

better about her approach. She was pushing and stretching things in a new way. So I started to imitate her way of drawing and I liked what it was doing for me.

Our producer Gennie asked me if I'd like her to work on the movie. She has a way of building the right team. So we brought her and Jin Kim, with whom I had worked on *Tangled*, and we designed these characters. They are three-dimensional, soft characters that feel like they have blood in their veins. It's something that I learned from the Nine Old Men at Disney. It's so much about sincerity in the eyes of the characters. So much of the performance is about animating the moment of discovery when an idea happens, and you can truly see it in their eyes.

It has been such a strange and difficult year for everyone. What do you hope audiences will take away from this movie when it screens in the fall?

To me, it's amazing Gennie and I got to do this wonderful film with Kobe Bryant, *Dear Basketball*, which expressed something that was so personal and such a life message for him. For this movie, Audrey Wells wrote this story knowing that she wasn't going to be around much longer, and she put this movie in our hands to communicate

Soulful Art: Keane is best known for designing characters such as Beast in *Beauty and the Beast*, Rapunzel in *Tangled*, Disney's Tarzan, and for directing the Oscar-winning short *Dear Basketball*.



that message. It's such a privilege, and we took that very seriously, wanting this film to be as entertaining, fun, emo-

tional and deeply applicable to our own lives.

What about the design of the characters?

Well, I knew I wanted to draw and design some of the characters in the movie, and I did. Disney gets so deeply ingrained in you after you spend 40 years there. I was looking at the designs and thinking, it's almost there, but there needs to be something more. I had seen Brittany Myers' work on the internet: She had done a wonderful painting of Ariel (*The Little Mermaid*). There was something different and

Ultimately, the film is about opening yourself up to love somebody new. We knew it had to be a musical, and so it features eight songs by our team (Christopher Curtis, Marjorie Duffield and Helen Park). The story is told through these songs. I want people to come away from the movie singing the songs, which are truly wonderful. I would also like them to value the importance of love and cherishing the people in your life. ♦

Over the Moon is set to premiere on Netflix this fall.



A New Friend from Another Planet

South Africa's Sunrise Productions' *Jungle Beat* launches a cinematic venture with the help of a friendly alien.

Cape Town-based Sunrise Productions is best known for producing the whimsical family series *Jungle Beat*, which first debuted about 15 years ago. Created and directed by Brent Dawes, the dialogue-free show follows the adventures of a giraffe, an elephant, a monkey, a hedgehog, a rhino and several other animals as they face different challenges in their daily lives in the African jungle. This year, fans will be able to enjoy a feature-length movie starring these popular animals, and this time around, they get to hear them speak as well.

As Dawes explained to us in a recent interview, the team at Sunrise — which included studio founder and exec producer Phil Cunningham and producer Rita Mbanga — jumped at the chance to build upon the world of these popular characters.

"When the opportunity to make a feature came about, I contemplated keeping it dialogue-free, but just felt there'd be more to ex-

plore and more fun to have if they spoke," says Dawes. "I didn't just want them to be able to speak and not address that, so in the movie it's part of the story: the animals can suddenly talk! I had to find a way to justify why they could talk, so I settled on the fact that an alien had ended up in the jungle."

The filmmaker says the story just evolved after that, and the whole project became more cinematic both in terms of plotline and its CG look. He says, "In terms of the visuals, it's just an appropriate evolution of the look developed for the series. It certainly still needed to feel like the *Jungle Beat* world, but we were able to put a bit more bells and whistles and polish to get a more cinematic look."

The Right Time

Cunningham says Sunrise always had an eye toward making movies. "After delivering a demo commissioned by Sandcastle Studios, a

conversation began and it felt like the perfect opportunity to make a *Jungle Beat* feature a reality," says the studio founder. "Sandcastle Studios is a new animation studio based in Mauritius, and as soon as they agreed to finance, distribute and produce a feature film based on the *Jungle Beat* brand, we were off and running. They have been tremendous partners throughout the entire process."

According to the producers, 195 people worked on the film in various capacities, and it took exactly two years to be delivered. "The core team was based at Sandcastle Studios in Mauritius supported by the Sunrise team," says Mbanga. "We used a variety of animation tools, including Storyboard Pro, Maya, Houdini, Nuke, Premiere Pro, Davinci Resolve, Pro Tools, Shotgun, Mari and Arnold."

From the outset, Sandcastle Studios made it clear that they only wanted to produce high-quality family friendly content, says Cun-



Brother from Another Planet: Sunrise Prod.'s *Jungle Beat: The Movie* introduces a new alien visitor to the world of the popular animal characters of the CG-animated children's show.



At left: Rita Mbanga and Phil Cunningham



ningham. "Our passion at Sunrise is storytelling and for us the ultimate format to do this in is feature film. We have been building towards the capacity to make animated feature films for years, and so when the opportunity with Sandcastle came along to finally start fulfilling that dream, we immediately jumped on board."

Dawes says there are three things that make the original series and the animal characters stand out. "Firstly, the fact that the series is non-dialogue means it has traveled really well. Humor is a universal language," he points out. "Secondly, jungle animals are always fun and interesting to kids. If you've got a cute elephant or funny monkey, it's going to appeal to a lot of our target market out the gate. And thirdly, it's got such an innocent heart that I think really resonates with people. It's not a show trying to be anything other than good-natured fun."

Strategic moves

The studio is promoting the movie's release

date in June as "The First Worldwide Family Movie Night of a feature film produced in Africa!" "Because of the pandemic we actually moved our release up by a few months," notes Mbanga. "We had to do a U-turn on our strategy and go from a fairly traditional theatrical release plan to an online strategy. Thankfully, our investors and partners are fully on board and have made it possible for us to launch a pretty big marketing and PR campaign around the film, within the shorter lead time to the film's release."

'In the movie, the animals can suddenly talk! I had to find a way to justify why they could talk, so I settled on the fact that an alien had ended up in the jungle.'

— Write-director Brent Dawes

not relocate to South Africa for some reason or another. The only cost is a few late, late night and early, early morning calls due to time zone differences. But generally, it seems that studios are hiring more than ever, and because there is a much greater demand for content currently with everyone being at home, the industry is full-steam ahead."

Dawes hopes that the new movie, which is one of 10 films selected for the long-form competition at the Annecy Festival this month,



inspires people to believe the best in others and bring about positive change. "There is a rather poetic line that our exec producer Phil has used throughout the

"I think we will come out of this with more agility and the realization that we can achieve more with remote work than we originally thought," says the producer. "Fortunately for us, animation is booming, and has been little affected by COVID-19 as far as we have experienced. As Phil says, we have realized that we can have a truly 'global studio,' and this has opened us up to working with some of the best animation talent in the world who can-

making of the film: 'through love is mastery,' which I think captures it beautifully. That through loving someone, through total acceptance of who they are, you can bring about positive change and hope and light. I think the world could use a lot more of that," he says with a smile. ♦

***Jungle Beat: The Movie* will be available on VOD on June 26.**



Among the binge-worthy shows recommended by our toon stars are (from top left): *The Golden Girls*, *The Midnight Gospel*, *The Mandalorian*, *Avatar: The Last Airbender*, *Never Have I Ever* and *Ozark*.

Animation Stars' Quarantine Survival Tips!

We have all experienced the challenges of being in shutdown over the past few months due to the global COVID-19 pandemic. So, we reached out to some of our favorite animation veterans to see how they're coping with their new lives in quarantine and which shows and movies they recommend to make the days and nights more enjoyable as we get ready for an uncertain summer worldwide! Here is what they shared with us:

Sergio Pablos

Writer/Director, *Klaus*

Fave activities: We had to dig deep to find ways to keep our eight-year old entertained, and my wife Marisa had a stroke of genius and designed a huge race track in the middle of our living room with tape for us to play *Chapas* on. Basically, you flick bottle caps until you reach the goal. It was intended to be there just for the day, but we kept postponing it and adding new features like LEGO ramps and shortcuts. It is now a mandatory daily family pastime and has completely taken over the living room, even forcing us to move furniture to accommodate it. So much fun.

Binge-watching tips: I'm not sure that I'd recommend what I'm watching to anyone. A good friend and I have this occasional "Bad Horror Movie Night" tradition, and since we're both stuck at home, we've been making it a frequent event. We'll pick the worst thing we can find, sync up our playtime (he from L.A. and I from Madrid, Spain), and just watch it all fall apart in front of us while we make bad jokes. I was afraid we



were going to quickly run out of bad movies at this rate, but if you're up for a similar experience, there's no shortage of horrible titles in most streaming services. Embrace the bad!

Jennifer Lee

CCO, Walt Disney Animation Studio,
Writer/Director, *Frozen*, *Frozen 2*

Fave activities: Making homemade sushi rolls. Had to turn a bamboo placemat into a rolling mat and all our fish comes from the freezer, but the fam keeps asking for more, so I keep going for it.

Binge-watching tips: I've officially seen every *Steven Universe* episode with my daughter — the music is great! I love *The Imagineering Story* series on Disney+. Currently escaping into Stephen King's new book of stories: *If It Bleeds*.



Jorge Gutierrez

Director, *The Book of Life*, *Maya and the Three*

Fave activities: My favorite part of my quarantine work day is that I get to have lunch with my family. I always felt that in our line of work, with the long hours and endless trips, we all missed out on lots of special family moments, big and small. Not anymore!



Binge-watching tips: Now that I get to make things that are culturally specific but universal for the whole world thanks to Netflix Animation, I'm catching up on series made in other parts of the world like *Dark*, *Narcos Mexico*, *Casa de Papel* and *Kingdom*. On the animation side, I'm really enjoying *The Midnight Gospel*, *Kengan Ashura* and revisiting my old favorites like *Ninja Scroll*, *Pinocchio*, *Spirited Away* and *The Nightmare Before Christmas*.

Bonnie Arnold

Producer, *How to Train Your Dragon* trilogy

Fave activities: I guess my favorite activity right now is some long walks in my neighborhood in Santa Monica.



I love books on tape and I enjoy listening along the way. I'm listening to Angelica Huston's autobiography, *Watch Me*. She is the reader and I am enjoying it. I worked with her on *The Addams Family*.

Binge-watching tips: My guilty pleasure quarantine viewing is vintage Westerns — Errol Flynn & Gary Cooper in particular. Trying to catch up on some Hollywood history. They don't make 'em like that anymore!

Chris Nee

Creator, *Doc McStuffins*, *Vampirina*

Fave activity: My favorite pastime during the lockdown is singing. By myself. With myself. For myself. I'm recording lots of tracks and singing harmony to my previous tracks. No, you will never hear them.



No one will. And that's liberating. As a professional maker, it's lovely to create with no expectation (indeed, horror at the thought) of anyone else seeing/hearing it.

Binge-watching tips: I've been watching *everything* — isn't everyone? But loving *Unorthodox*, *Mrs. America* and *Normal People*. Thank God this happened during the Golden Age of Television. Imagine if you had to binge watch *The Love Boat* or *Fantasy Island*? There have also been some great features like *Crip Camp* and *The Half of It*.

Walt Dohrn

Director, *Trolls World Tour*

Fave activities: I'm going to pick two favorite quarantine activities — both are done with and without the kids, depending on the time of day. The first is drawing, which if everyone's asleep in the early morning hours, I will work on my daily diary comic in my sketchbook (some of which I post on Instagram). The kids and I practice our drawing — which these days involves a lot of Garfields! The second favorite activity is playing music—both with and without the kids, again. We have everything from an out-of-tune piano, to ukuleles, to a steel drum! It's cathartic to pull it all out of the closet and sing and play our hearts out!



Binge-watching tips: We have all been watching a lot of *Adventure*

Time since quarantine: We've started at the beginning and hopefully will make it to the last season. It's my younger kids' first time experiencing these characters and I still feel like the show is the most innovative, fun thing on TV. Then when everyone's asleep, I have been watching Pen Ward's new show on Netflix — *The Midnight Gospel*. It is mind-bendingly surreal and definitely transports you to a place you have never been. Plus, it's funny as well!

Aliki Theofilopoulos

Exec Producer, *Harvey Girls Forever!*

Fave activity: I finally bought a bike! So, I've discovered that taking neighborhood rides after working indoors all day is exhilarating and a fun exercise! It's been my favorite thing to do either by myself or with my family.



Bing-watching tips: My favorite binge so far has been *The Crown* on Netflix. I hadn't seen it but had heard so much about it. All three seasons were a wonderful and welcome distraction during this crazy time. My husband and I also just started watching, *What We Do in the Shadows* and find it just as funny and delightful as the movie!

Mike Rianda

Director/Writer, *Connected*

Fave activities: It's a tie between shivering in the corner (weeping of course) and screaming incoherently into the cold icy void. Kidding of course — I consider myself very fortunate, and if you're like me



and things aren't that bad, give to those in need! A few organizations that come to mind are Heart to Heart International and World Central Kitchen. My wife and I have also been making homemade board games and scavenger hunts, which have been a lot of fun. It's also great connecting with old friends who live far away. You know — people are more and more *Connected* these days!

Binge-watching tips: Here are some of my favorite movies, some of which are on the Criterion Channel, which I've been loving — watch them all and become empowered with cinematic fury!: *The Last Detail*, *We Are the Best!*, *Grave of the Fireflies*, *Whisper of the Heart*, *Sullivan's Travels*, *Paris Texas*, *Shoplifters*, *Big Deal on Madonna Street*, *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*, *Ikiru*, *Show Me Love*, *You Can Count On Me*, *The Heartbreak Kid*, *Minding the Gap* and more! TV Shows: *Your Hands Off Eizouken!* (an amazing show about animation) on Crunchyroll, *Never Have I Ever* on Netflix, and *Forever* on Amazon.

Jeff Rowe

Co-director, Co-writer, *Connected*

Fave activities: (T)here (I)s (M)any an (E)xciting (I)nteresting (S)illy (A)ctivity (F)or (L)aughing (A)way (T)ime: (C)ooking, (I)nternet, (R)eadings, (C)ard games, (L)earning, (E)xercise, (H)ealthy (E)ating, (L)aughter, (P)laying games, (M)aking acrostics, (E)ating.



Binge-watching tips: *Never Have I Ever* is the best! I've also been trying to chip away at AFI's 100 list and failing.

Jinko Gotoh

Producer, *The Little Prince*, *Klaus*, *Escape from Hat*

Fave activities: Cooking, baking and gar-



dening, when I'm not busy on Google Hangout and Zoom calls.

Binge-watching tips: I've been watching *Unorthodox*, *Salt Fat Acid Heat* and *Midnight Diner: Tokyo Stories* on Netflix.

Joel Kuwahara,

Co-Founder/President of Production,
Bento Box Entertainment

Fave activity: Changing diapers on my newborn.

Binge-watching tips: What's TV?



Wendy Rogers

Director, *The Extincts*; VFX Supervisor,
Puss in Boots

Fave activities: Virtual Happy Hour with our crew on Friday evenings is one of my favorite quarantine activities! We have an amazingly talented and passionate crew – it's a joy to all get together at the end of the week. Also, wine Zoom on the weekend with my friends ... wait, do all my favorite activities include wine?

Binge-watching tips: The farewell season of *Schitt's Creek* was a real pleasure, and there's a new season of *Money Heist* to catch up on! I've just started watching *Billions*, and I'm completely addicted – brilliant characters!



James Baxter

Head of Character Animation, Netflix

Fave activities: Well, I'm enjoying cooking at home, but I think I may be running out of things I know how to cook (which is a pretty short and simple list). Time to break out some cookbooks! I'm also enjoying trying to teach myself a little 3D modeling in Blender. I'm making tons of mistakes, but it's really fun.

Binge-watching tips: *Westworld*, *The Mandalorian* and re-watching *The Office*. As far as animation goes, I've been re-watching some of *Avatar: The Last Airbender* and *The Legend of Korra*. That stuff is really cool – well-drawn, well-staged, with awesome characters and a really well-thought-out lore.



Clare Knight

Editor, *The LEGO Movie: The Second Part*,
Kung Fu Panda trilogy

Fave activities: Before quarantine, I loved indoor cycling or spin. When it all started I knew I would miss it so much, so I made my road bike into an indoor cycling bike using a stand. I placed it in our backyard next to a beautiful rose bed and love it even more than a spin studio. We also adopted a puppy in February and were worried we would all be at work and not all have the time with him. The quarantine has given us a complete bonding with him, and now as I am on my bike, he runs laps around me.

Binge-watching tips: I am an Irish person living in L.A., so I appreciate that streaming services help me travel home through international shows: I love and recommend *Derry Girls*, a very funny comedy on Netflix about four schoolgirls living in 1980s Northern Ireland. I've just started *Caliphate*, a Swedish series about the British girls who ran away to Syria. Julian Fellowes' *Belgravia* has kept me completely enraptured. Every weekend we introduce a movie to our 10-year-old son. Last week we watched *Galaxy Quest*, and



this week we'll see *Scoob!* I love and recommend the smart oddball comedy *The Willoughbys* and also the Ricky Gervais show *Afterlife*, which handles loss and grief in such a beautiful way. My son wants us to watch all seasons of *The Clone Wars*, but I'm not sure if the pandemic will go on that long!

Pete Docter

Director, *Up*, *Inside Out*, *Soul*

Fave activities: Reading and hiking. I love reading and hiking. When this is all over, I want to look back and say, "Oh yeah, that was the time when I did all that reading and hiking." How's that going? Well, right now I'm sitting at the computer.

Binge-watching tips: We streamed through *Schitt's Creek*, which was a lot of fun. As soon as that's done, look out: reading and hiking.

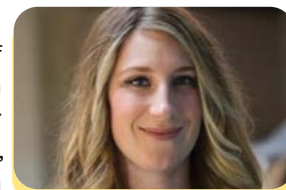


Kristen Lester

Director, *Purl*

Fave activities: I've been doing a lot of clothes washing by hand because I live in an apartment that doesn't have a washer or dryer. It's weird and it's a lot of work, but washing things myself and then hanging them out on a line to dry has given me a huge sense of pride and accomplishment. Of course, it's also frustrating because it takes me two hours to wash a load of laundry the size of a small fist, but it's reminded me to never forget that there's a huge sense of accomplishment that comes with achieving a physical goal. Next step? Victory garden!

Binge-watching tips: I've been very fortunate to have a fiancé who subscribed to the Criterion Channel before all this started and it has been amazing. Watching classic movies, discovering old arthouse films and foreign language films has been so awesome. Recently I've watched: *Caramel* – a touching movie about women running a hair salon in Lebanon (the director was the first woman to be nominated for Best Foreign Language Film this year at the Oscars), *The Wonders* – a coming of age story set in Italy, *Daisies* – a weird arthouse movie from the '60s about best friends that's just the best visual explosion ever, and Peter Weir's *Picnic at Hanging Rock*. All amazing.



Dan Scanlon

Director, *Onward*, *Monsters University*

Fave activity: Napping. I'm tired after five years of working on *Onward*.

Binge-watching tips: I haven't been watching movies, I've mainly been reading comics and graphic novels nonstop. I've been ordering five or six books a week since the shelter-in-place, both to support my local comic store, but also to get caught up on everything I've been meaning to read for years. That said my wife and I have been loving season two of *What We Do in the Shadows*! The premise is great, the production design and effects are beautiful and brilliant – which is so wonderful to see in a comedy. And the cast is across the board top talent.



Andrew Stanton

Director, *Finding Nemo*, *WALL-E*, *Finding Dory*

Fave activity: Writing. Turns out a writer's



life was always a quarantined activity. Introverts (remotely) unite!

Binge-watching tips: *Ozark*, *McMillions*, *Tales from the Loop*, *Devs*, *Portrait of a Lady on Fire*.

Dana Terrace

Creator/Exec Producer, *The Owl House*

Fave activity: Biking through empty streets just as the sun goes down!

Binge-watching tips: I recently watched all of Pendleton Ward's *The Midnight Gospel* and it was one of the most heartfelt, quirky and genuinely emotional shows I've ever seen. Work of art! On the live-action side, I'm currently keeping up with *What We Do in the Shadows*, one of those rare shows that reminds you how joyful entertainment can be.



Kris Pearn

Writer/Director, *The Willoughbys*

Fave activity: I play *Dominion* with my daughters over the phone, and chess and scrabble with my girlfriend. Cooking, which is a completely new skill. And I'm drawing more for myself, which is really great and passing the time. Uhhh ... lots of random phone calls to friends, which is *super* weird for me. I'm talking the "Hi ... how ya' doin'" sort of calls with no real point other than contact with another living soul!

Binge-watching tips: I recently loved *Unorthodox*. I've also been catching up on old movies like *Tootsie*, *Planes Trains and Automobiles*, *Ferris Bueller's Day Off*, *M.A.S.H.* I loved *Knives Out*, *Ford Vs Ferrari* and *Parasite*. I also binged three seasons of *It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia*. John Oliver keeps me sane. And have filled out the mandatory *Tiger King* time card ... aaaaaand ... one more season of *Ozark* left. Also ... wrestling documentaries. The *Behind the Ring* about Jimmy "Superfly" Snuka was pretty great.



Glen Keane

Director, *Over the Moon*

Fave activity: Writing handwritten letters to my family and drawing jigsaw puzzles I send in the mail to my grandkids. There's something so personal about opening a handwritten letter as compared to an email ... I want to make this a regular part of my life.

Binge-watching tip: *Tangled* ... The themes of what we are all living through are symbolized in the movie. Being trapped inside a tower afraid of the kingdom of Corona are just the obvious ones!



Krista Tucker

Co-Producer/Story Editor, *Fancy Nancy*

Fave activity: Sitting in my backyard and observing nature.

Binge-watching tips: I've started re-watching *The Sopranos*, which I loved years ago. Even though I'm not a fan of violence, I love the writing and characters.



Alec Sulkin

Showrunner/Executive Producer, *Family Guy*

Fave activity: Well, it's not an activity, but my wife has been making eye-rolls. She gives them to me all the time, so I've gained a little

weight (yet somehow I feel smaller).

Binge-watching tip: I've been watching *Downton Abbey* again so I can feel like I'm quarantining in a nice house.



Rich Appel

Showrunner/Executive Producer, *Family Guy*

Fave activity: Texting friends that I'm going to use this time to learn how to bake bread, speak a second language and finish those three pilots I started writing in the '90s. Then I put the phone down and watch six more episodes of *Below Deck*.

Binge-watching tips: Since I want sincere recommendations, I'm only going to offer sincere recommendations: *Call My Agent* on Netflix, a really well-acted comedy that's also at times touching and poignant, about a talent agency that's every bit as petty and underhanded as you'd expect, but it's set in Paris so it seems kinda classy; *Line of Duty* on Hulu, the single best police procedural I've ever seen, engrossing and engaging, layered stories filled with huge turns that are always earned and justified; and *Morning Joe*. I like *Morning Joe*. I watch it because that still gives me the rest of the day to try to forget the colossal incompetence that's no doubt keeping us holed up at home in the first place.



Marge Dean

Head of Studio, Crunchyroll; President, Women in Animation

Fave activity: Growing veggies and then photographing them.

Binge-watching tips: To get away from it all, I recommend *Rockford Files* with a little *Golden Girls* on the side.



Julie Lockhart

Co-CEO, Locksmith Animation; Producer, *Ron's Gone Wrong*

Fave activities: Taking the dog for a walk last thing at night – the clear skies, clean air and complete lack of people and noise in a usually bustling city is a glorious treat to be savoured.

Binge-watching tips: My teenage boys and I quickly devoured Ricky Gervais's *After Life* for the fantastic larger-than-life and eminently animatable character ... and Sally Rooney's *Normal People* for its poignant, nostalgic look at the joy, pain and heartache of first love (although the intense intimate scenes did make mother and sons slightly uncomfortable ... perhaps best viewed without the teenagers!).



JP Vine

Director, *Ron's Gone Wrong*

Fave activities: Lately my favorite quarantine activities have nearly all involved gin, but as the spring gets warmer and animation dailies get more intense, my new habit is the lunchtime power snooze in the backyard. Difficult to do at work without feeling weird, but no-one knows what I'm up to when I'm not on Zoom – oh wait!

Binge-watching tips: I've been trying to get away from screens and do some painting, but my wife and I loved *Unorthodox* on Netflix. Compelling viewing. ♦



Elegy for an Episode

By Josh Selig



I wish I could say that our episode did not suffer, but it suffered terribly. And I wish I could say that it left us too soon, but I think we can all agree that 11 minutes was long enough. Friends, colleagues, toy people, our beloved episode died last week for one reason and one reason only: We could not keep it alive from logline to animation, (and I use the word “animation” loosely since, at times, our characters did not move at all.) I wish I could say that I was not filled with *ennui*, that I have moved on like a healthy show creator, and begun to think about other things, other episodes, the plight of the coral reefs. But, clearly, I have not.

And so, I have asked you all to join me here, today, beside this wee casket, to try and bring closure to 1207B, an episode that I now watch every night, again and again, as if by doing so I might somehow get it to not completely suck. (I know this is futile but futility, like tiramisu, has always had an irresistible pull for me.) I am not here to cast blame, mind you, because we are all, obviously, to blame (even those of us who are not predisposed to taking any blame for anything ever.) Rather, I am here in the hope that by admitting our shortcomings, by repenting for our co-produced sins, we might save the lives of other at-risk episodes and restore our dignity, if not our ratings.

In order to move forward, let us first look back. The writer, as we all know, had issues: His writing partner, for example, was a large fluorescent bong. But his script was nimble and funny ... that is, until the notes came in from three continents leaving it (and him) as devastated as Venice once the cruise ships began to dock.

Were there moments when I, personally, could have stepped in and saved the episode? Oh, yes. Far too many to count. For instance, when the broadcaster said there was no need for research because her four-year-old had “really great instincts,” I held my tongue. (As some of you know, I’ve been trying hard this decade to play nicely with others, and I’ve found that by simply not speaking at all I help myself considerably in this regard.) And when we kicked off storyboard, I recall that our director distinctly asked that 1207B not, I repeat, *not* be drawn by the interns.

He said the comedy was just too nuanced to give to a team whose only real experience was drawing Pikachu on their sneakers.

But draw the boards they did, and our episode was further punished. Did anything in 1207B work? Maybe, almost. The scene in which the polar bear mistakenly befriends the Volkswagen is not without charm. And I admit I smiled a little when the poo awoke and sang his poo song. Some will say, “So what? It’s one episode out of 52! Even the Persians deliberately drop one stitch while making a carpet because they believe only God - yes *only God* - should be perfect!” Well, bully for the Persians, but our team did not drop episode 1207B on purpose!

No, we neglected it. We were too busy with more important things: Arguing over whose notes were the alpha notes, grooming our press release like a Pomeranian in the Westminster Dog Show, and going to Faux Meat Fridays which nobody - seriously, *nobody* - ever enjoyed!

I will say it aloud: We failed. It was hubris! It was too many cooks! It was the same pride that has destroyed everything good from the Ancient Greeks to the reboot of *Cats*! We did it! We killed 1207B! And now all the retakes on the Indian subcontinent could not bring it back!

Just a moment. Let me gather myself. If the years have taught us anything, it’s that our young viewers look to our shows for laughter, for comfort, and for meaning. They will accept new characters and new styles. They are generous, and they want us to succeed. But there are some things that neither God nor the kids we serve will *ever* forgive us for: Being unoriginal, assuming they will like something that we ourselves do not like, or delivering a bad episode.

May this one rest in peace. Amen.



Josh Selig founded Little Airplane Productions (a Studio 100 company) in 1999. He is the creator and executive producer of the Emmy-winning series *Wonder Pets!*, *3rd & Bird* and *Oobi*. He has received 10 Emmy Awards for his work as a writer on *Sesame Street* and a Humanitas Award for his work as head writer of *Little Bill*.



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Spotlight on World Cinema

This year's Annecy Festival will showcase 20 animated movies, 10 as part of the Official selection in competition and another 10 in the Contrechamps sidebar. Here are the ten films that will be in the Official competition:

Bigfoot Family (a.k.a. Bigfoot Superstar). This sequel to the 2017 CG-animated feature *Son of Bigfoot* is directed by Ben Stassen and Jérémie Degruson and finds teenager Adam using his superpowers to protect the environment and traveling to Alaska with his animal friends. **Belgium/France: nWave, Charades.**

Calamity, a Childhood of Martha Jane Cannary. Directed by Rémi Chayé (*Long Way North*), this beautifully animated 2D feature charts the early days of the famous frontier-swoman and professional scout as she has to take care of her siblings after her father is injured during their journey west. **France/Denmark: Maybe Movies, Nørlum Studios, Gebeka.**

Ginger's Tale. Konstantin Scherkin directs this 2D animated fairy tale about a young girl named Ginger who has to save her friend after he finds a magical object known as the Stone of Fire. **Russia: VVERH**

Jungle Beat: The Movie. Brent Dawes directs this CG-animated feature about an alien visitor who befriends a group of helpful animals in Africa. **Mauritius: Sandcastle, Sunrise Studios**

Kill It and Leave This Town Directed by Mariusz Willczynski, this surreal 2D animated film centers on a man who hides in his childhood memories in 1970s-era Poland after the loss of his loved ones. **Poland: Bombonierka, Extreme Options**

Little Vampire. Acclaimed French graphic novelist and director Joann Sfar (*The Rabbi's Cat*) is back with this charming 2D adaptation of his popular work about a 10-year-old bloodsucker who decides to go back to school to make some friends. **France: Autochenille, La Compagnie Cinématographique, France 3, The Magical Society, Panache, Story, StudioCanal**

Lupin III: The First. Directed by Takashi Yamazaki, this CG-animated version of the popular anime series finds Arsene Lupin III teaming up with a young archeologist to steal a treasure known as the Bresson Diary, which is tied to his grandfather's legacy. **Japan: TMS, Marza Animation**

Nahuel and the Magic Book. This 2D/CG animated feature tells the story of a fisherman's son who has to search for his lost father after a sorcerer separates them in a terrible storm. Directed by German Acuña. **Chile/Brazil: Punkrobot, Carburadores, Levante Films**

The Nose or the Conspiracy of Mavericks. Acclaimed Russian director Andrey Khrzhanovsky (*Cat and a Half, The Lion with the White Beard*) offers a "cheerfully grim" look at the strange history of the 20th century, filtered through Gogol's proto-Surrealist novella *The Nose* and Dmitri Shostakovich's opera. **Russia: Studio Shar**

Seven Days War. Yuta Murano directs this adaptation of Osamu Sōda's novel about some middle school students who rebel against their school and parents, take over an abandoned factory and turn it into a fortress. **Japan: Studia Ajia-do, Kadokawa Pictures**

The Contrechamps Sidebar

Accidental Luxuriance of the Translucent Watery Rebus
Dir: Dalibor Baric (Croatia)

Beauty Water
Dir: Kyung-hun Cho (South Korea)

The Knight and the Princess
Dir: Bashir El Deek, Ibrahim Mousa (Saudi Arabia, Egypt)

Lava
Dir: Ayar Blasco (Argentina)

The Legend of Hei
Dir: Ping Zhang (China)

My Favorite War
Dir: Ilze Burkovska Jacobsen (Latvia, Norway)

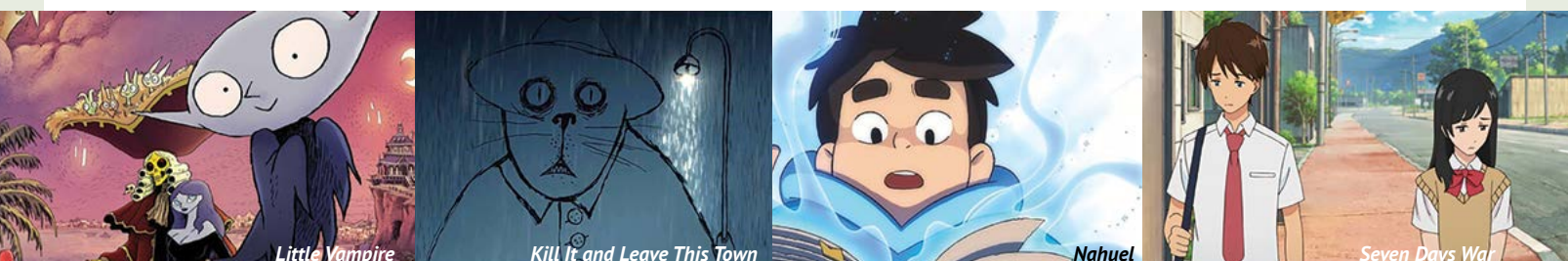
On Gaku: Our Sound!
Dir: Kenji Iwaisawa (Japan)

The Old Man – The Movie
Dir: Mikk Mägi, Oskar Lehemaa (Estonia)

The Shaman Sorceress
Dir: Jae-huun Ahn (South Korea)

True North
Dir: Eiji Han Shimizu (Japan, Indonesia)

Annecy Festival will take place online from June 15-30. For more info, visit www.annecy.org.





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Brilliant Visions in an Uncertain World

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, this year's Annecy Festival will be held online. Nothing really replaces seeing a new short with a packed house full of animation lovers, but at least the virtual version of the event provides a spotlight for many artists to showcase their work. We chatted with some of the talented directors whose shorts were selected for the Official Competition at the festival to find out more about their process, inspirations and individual stories.

Adrien Merigeau, *Genius Loci*

Adrien Merigeau was inspired to make his award-winning short *Genius Loci* after spending time with an Irish friend who seemed to be living a spiritual experience. "I wanted to write about different states of consciousness and about abandon, in the way that you leave a specific state in order to drift to another state, from being functioning to being useless, from the cultural to the natural, like a glass of water tipping over, and the existential change that comes with that transition," says the talented artist, who also directed the Cristal-nominated short *Old Fangs* (2010) and was the art director on Cartoon Saloon's *Song of the Sea*. "I was also very inspired by the American music composer John Cage, for whom all the activity of sound is considered music – it's only the act of listening that changes. I wanted to talk about urban chaos and how it can feel like being in nature."

Merigeau wrote the initial script and visual development and got the greenlight for production in 2016. It took him almost four years to finish the well-crafted short, which won the top prize at this year's Berlin and GLAS festivals. It was produced mostly at Folimage Studio's Valence location. The director notes, "Luckily, I was able to use their workshop to have a team of about five people



working with me. I started animating on paper but quickly changed to TVPaint when the team of animators was hired, for efficiency. We then printed out all the animation frames on normal A4 paper and taped watercolor paper onto it and colored it with inks with a light table."

He says although the process was time consuming, he loves the organic feel of the result. "I would still have liked to keep everything on paper because it feels to me that drawing on paper has a meditative feel that I don't get on the computer, but the film was too long and we didn't have enough time for that," adds the director.

When asked about his biggest influences, the French helmer says, "Tomm Moore is a massive influence for me in the way that he adapts folklore to his modern visual language, and then Yuri Norstein, Stuart Hilton, *When the Day Breaks* by Amanda Forbis and Wendy Tilby and *Cat Soup* by Masaaki Yuasa would be some favorites of mine."

For now, the director is letting the short have its own life as more people discover it at festivals this year. "In some ways my work with this film is done now and how the film lives from this moment onward is not really up to me anymore," he admits. "But if there was one general idea that was carried through the making of *Genius Loci*, and that I would be happy to see radiate from it, it would be that some things don't have to mean anything in order to give us pleasure."

Camila Kater, *Carne*

When Brazilian animator Camila Kater was a young girl, she recalls her family talking about issues surrounding gaining weight and going on diets. “I lived with my mother, my aunt and my sister, and I remember being very concerned about my body at the age of six,” she says. “My personal experiences and the stories I heard from my family were the inspirations behind *Carne*.”

Kater further explains, “The idea for the ironic association between women’s bodies and the meat cooking points came from a conversation I had with my sister, Bruna Kater. We delved into Simone de Beauvoir’s discussion about how we women are seen as a body before being considered human beings – even as an object of consumption – and how this perception of the body changes according to our age, sexual orientation, race, social class, profession, etc.”

The short began pre-production in the beginning of 2018 and took about a year and a half to complete. The project is an Ibero-American co-production: Livia Perez (Doctela) produced *Carne* in Brazil and Chelo Loureiro (Abano Produções) produced in Spain. *Carne* has five chapters, and each one is animated by a different woman animator (Kater, Giovana Affonso, Flávia Godoy, Cassandra Reis, Leila Monsegur).

“Each one of us animated our chapters in our houses in Brazil,” says Kater. “We used softwares like Dragonframe for the stop motion; Toon Boom, Photoshop and TVPaint for the 2D animation. Each chapter was made in a different medium: oil painting and objects, watercolor, 2D digital, clay and painting on the 35mm film. The idea to explore different media came after interviewing the first protagonist, Rachel Patrício, and the intention was to represent the diversity in the film and create a sensorial perception for each individual story.”

Kater says the biggest challenge was the documentary nature of the project. “I felt it was a great responsibility to tell the five protagonists’ stories. Myself and Ana Julia Carvalheiro, who wrote the script with me, were very concerned about respecting the intimate testimonies which were trusted to us. The unpredictable aspect of the documentary also scared me in the beginning, because in animation everything must be very well planned beforehand, and being unable to know how the interviews were going to be was uneasy. However, the surprises turned out to be the best part of the process.”

The director mentions the works of Elizabeth Hobbs, Rosana Urbes and Michèle Cournoyer as some of her major influences. She adds, “I hope the short helps people realize how this cruel association between women’s body and meat cooking points affects how we women relate to our own body in different ages and how race, sexual orientation, gender identity, social position, profession (among other factors) can generate different experiences.”



Natko Stipaničev, *Arka*

Serbian animator Natko Stipaničev recalls having a conversation with poet Maša Seničić on the final night of his residency at MultiMadeira about four years ago. “I was there for a month and didn’t come up with any good ideas for my script,” he says. “I had already given up, but then I started talking about cruise ships that had anchored in front of us in the port of Funchal, and that’s when the idea suddenly struck!”



“It took me about three years from the idea to the final film, but mostly because I was learning animation along the way, so I was watching tutorials half of the time!” says Stipaničev. “The good thing about it was that I had a clear goal and all the learning helped in solving actual problems and going forward with the film. I produced the short mostly on one laptop with Cinema 4D and After Effects.”

The creative animator says his biggest challenge was to come up with a solid script and a good animatic. “Once I believed it was going to be a good film and developing this passion for it, producing was a pleasure and a very enjoyable task. Now that it’s ready, I just hope audiences will enjoy the short.”

When asked about his influences, he mentions Jérémy Clapin. “His short films are probably the reason I started animating,” says Stipaničev. “I also really admire the works of Emma De Swaef and Marc James Roels.”

Alberto Vázquez, *Homeless Home*

Those of us who have fallen in love with Alberto Vázquez's animated gems such as *Birdboy* and *Decorado* know to expect great things from the Spanish director. Luckily, he is offering a new short titled *Homeless Home* just in time for this year's Annecy festival. He says the inspiration came from the medieval fantasies he read as a young boy.

"My idea was to work from a world similar to *The Lord of the Rings*, but from a personal perspective," says the director. "I'm interested in working with the genre to do the opposite of what is expected, and that's how the idea for this short film came about, which is a kind of social and existential history contextualized in a medieval fantasy world. *Homeless Home* has been a little different, because until now, all my films featured anthropomorphic animals within fable worlds, while in this short film the main characters are witches, ogres, sorcerers, skeletons and orcs in a different environment!"

Vázquez says it took him and his team about a year and a half to finish the project. "At first it was just a superficial idea, but my producers sent it to a grant in France and they awarded it to us, so we had to do the short film," he tells us. "The animation was produced between Spain and France – from UNIKO and Auteur de Minuit, the producers I work with. They were in charge of carrying out this short film. We used Flash to make the rough animation, and then we painted and did the light using Photoshop frame by frame. The backgrounds are made in Photoshop; some worked with a photographic base and others not. Visually, the atmosphere is quite dark and pictorial, moving away a bit from the graphic nature of my other productions. The characters are drawn as semi-silhouettes that integrate very well with these textured and pictorial backgrounds."



"I like my shorts to be entertaining, but I really hope they'll be remembered and that they make the audience reflect," adds Vázquez. "I would also like the work to be interesting on a visual and symbolic level and try to have a certain personality that is, to do something that sets us apart from other productions and apart from trends or fashions."

Among his influences, Vázquez names classics such as *Watership Down*, *Barefoot Gen*, *My Neighbors the Yamadas*, *Spirited Away* and *Akira*. "Actually my tastes are very classic," he adds. "I like timeless works, which do not fit in any time and place. During these past two months in quarantine, I have watched many historical documentaries combined with lots of classic cinema. I also enjoyed Adult Swim's *The Shivering Truth*, the stop-motion series directed by Vernon Chatman. I really liked it because it's so haunting, dark and unforgettable, and has an absurd sense of humor."

The talented Spanish helmer is also working on his next movie, *Unicorn Wars*. He is kind enough to leave us with some advice: "When writing stories, it's always a good idea to pass them through your own filter, for your personal experiences. Try not to fall into clichés and contribute your own vision of the world, because in that way, they will be more honest for the viewers. In other words, don't try to be the artist that you're not!"

Niki Lindroth von Bahr, *Something to Remember*

Three years ago, Niki Lindroth von Bahr dazzled worldwide audiences with *The Burden*, her charming musical short which won the big Cristal prize at Annecy. This year, the talented Swedish director is back with another whimsical look at the foibles of the human/animal experience.

She tells us that she opted for a completely new process for her 2020 offering: "Instead of doing a year of research, I chose to



connect various fragments and situations that had been with me for a long time," she says. "It is accompanied by a darker version of an old Swedish lullaby that I used to play for my daughter. I think this film unconsciously became a processing of becoming a new parent, presenting our strange world to a newborn child."

Lindroth von Bahr began the project in February of last year, and it premiered in September at the Toronto International Film Festival. "That was crazy fast for me," she says. "It was made in my own studio, a basement south of Stockholm. It is wonderfully animated by Anna Mantzaris and Eirik Grønmo Bjørnsen, and we used Dragonframe and a Canon 5D camera to produce it. This film's production went very nicely, and I had a lot of fun. But I'm taking antidepressants these days so most things in life get easier!"

The talented director says she's a huge fan of fellow artists Réka Bucsi and Marc James Roels and Emma De Swaef. "I was absolutely

blown away by *This Magnificent Cake!*" she says. "It's a masterpiece."

And what is the main message she would like audiences to get from her sublime new short? She responds, "The devil sees whatever you do!"

Zachary Zezima, *Friend of a Friend*

Zachary Zezima had a strange nightmare in which a man had been kept in a basement as a punishment for a sex crime and had transformed into a bubbling creature. "That was the initial impetus for making the short," says the L.A.-based artist. "Then there was an assault within my friend group which caused me to reconsider my own morals and outlook on sex and behavior, both conscious and unconscious. All of this, mixed with my own experiences with abuse and theories on cycles of trauma, congealed into an idea and film I felt had to be made no matter how difficult the process."

Zezima began writing the script for *Friend of a Friend* three years ago, and worked on the project until the summer of 2019 for about two and a half years. "My assistant Angela Stempel and I completed all of the backgrounds and animated line-work in Los Angeles, then finished up the coloring, compositing, editing, and sound design in France. We did all of the animation and coloring in TVPaint and then composited in After Effects."

He says interacting with the tough subject matter for such an extended period of time was a major challenge for him. "The film is about a sexual assault, sexuality, abuse, deceit, manipulation, vigilantism and other heavy topics, so consistently being and thinking in a space that concerned the darker sides of life took its toll at times," admits Zezima. "I found I was personally much more irritable during the production of this film than others in the past, and felt there was a real emotional burden being undertaken by everyone on the team in order to create the film. Drawing and coloring some of the more violent scenes took days and days and was sometimes hard to look at. Angela was a big support for me during the process and she carried it along with me throughout, so I am very grateful. I'm not sure I could have done this alone!"

The filmmaker says the ultimate message of his short is that nothing is black and white. "Everything in life exists in the in-between space, even if you don't realize it or don't want to believe it," Zezima notes. "No one is good and no one is bad. We've all done things we are not proud of and have questioned our own behaviors and actions, which for me are directly tied to upbringing and environments. To be more self-aware, and to accept free will over one's own past, is my goal for myself and for others to take away. We all have things in our lives that if allowed can put us down a destructive path, and it's up to each of us to reject that and choose to overcome as best we can. There will always be obstacles, but it is important to try to be better whenever we can."



Michael Shanks, *Rebooted*

A charming and timely short, *Rebooted*. “As a kid, one of the things that drew me to movies was learning about the magic behind the scenes – and this premise was a way for me to pay tribute to the amazing artists behind the stuff I obsessed over as a kid,” explains the director. “The impetus of the idea came when I was watching an old, behind-the-scenes special documentary on *The Empire Strikes Back* on YouTube. Mark Hamill was hosting and (in a really cheesy way) introduced R2-D2 as one of his co-stars. That really got this idea in my head: What if all the puppets, animatronics and rubber characters were really actors, too?”

Shanks tells us that the short took about two years to make, from financing to release.

“In order to complete the animation, we had to transform our (tiny) office into a stop-motion animation workshop,” says the Aussie helmer. “We cordoned off half the space with huge black sheets to create a lighting controllable environment, whilst cramming everything else into the other half of the office – which still had to function on other projects. Samuel Lewis, our animator, worked predominantly in Dragonframe, and then I would composite our stop-motion animated lead into the live-action frames using After Effects. We also had a 2D animated character (I believe animated in After Effects) and Maya was used



to render our Mid-90s-Liquid-Metal-Man character named Mid-90s-Liquid-Metal-Man.”

The director points out that other than the obvious difficulties in creating such a technically challenging piece of work, writing the script was a really tough prospect. “I started with a premise and character that I loved, but there were a huge number of iterations of stories as I tried to crack what the plot should be,” adds Shank. “There were versions of the film that took place entirely in a museum, entirely at a funeral. It was a long time into the scripting process when the idea to make it a silent film really opened it up to me, and I wrote that final version of the script in the next day.”

Shank cites Ray Harryhausen movies – especially the skeletons from *Jason and the Argonauts* and *The 7th Voyage of Sinbad* – as some of his biggest influences. He says the story is largely about celebrating the old techniques of the masters, but he hopes people don’t buy the notion that because “the past was great, the present isn’t.” He adds, “While our main character Phil (a stop-motion animated skeleton) is struggling to find work due to being an obsolete visual effect, doesn’t mean that the film is commenting that modern visual effects (i.e. CGI) are anything negative – we love CGI! The short is about celebrating all artistry across the medium of filmmaking and I hope it draws attention to the magic of VFX artists whose aim is usually to be invisible.”

Jasmine Elsen, *Carousel*

A woman has her daily routines interrupted by unexpected arrivals in Jasmine Elsen's powerful new short, *Carousel*. The young animator says she wanted to explore the theme of dehumanization. "I wanted to find out why and how someone is capable of violence due to hatred against a group of people," she tells us. "The dehumanizing of people is caused by a strong 'us versus them' thinking."

Elsen began writing the short in 2017, and then production and post took place between December of 2018 and January of this year. The 2D animation was produced at Animal Tank in Ghent, Belgium, and the stop-motion part was done at Anima studio in Prague, Czech Republic. "We conducted the two sides/worlds visually in different techniques," says the director. "The film is mainly animated in 2D but is sometimes combined with stop-motion of flat objects, such as sewing thread, felt and clay. This mix of techniques represents the fact that everyone has different interpretations of the same event."

The directory says the process was sometimes challenging. "It wasn't easy, for example, when I was animating with Martin Smatana in Prague and, during the evenings, I was checking the animations of the 2D animators in Belgium. But I was really lucky to work together with this amazing team full of talented and funny people."

Elsen says there are a lot of animation directors and films that she considers big influences in her career. But doing the writing of *Carousel*, she narrows down the field to *Oh Willy...* by Emma De Swaef and Marc James Roels, *Symphony No. 42* by Réka Bucsi, *Wind* by Robert Löbel, *Happy End* by Jan Saska and *The Bigger Picture* by Daisy Jacobs. As she gets ready to get more feedback from the virtual Annecy Festival, Elsen says she hopes they will enjoy watching her short, even if they don't feel like they understand everything that is going on. "What would be great is if viewers get some ideas from the film and discuss it with each other afterwards," she offers.



Alexandre Siqueira, *Purpleboy*

If at first you don't succeed ... you keep rewriting, revising and applying for grants! That's what happened to Brazilian animator Alexandre Siqueira, who spent the years between 2011 and 2016 developing his short *Purpleboy*, and three more years to actually produce it. "The first image I had of this project was that of a child pushing the body rooted in the ground and of a person who watered it every day – a metaphor for growth and personal development," he recalls. "So with this idea, I started to apply for some funds and to look for producers. But things were not easy in the beginning. I've got many rejections

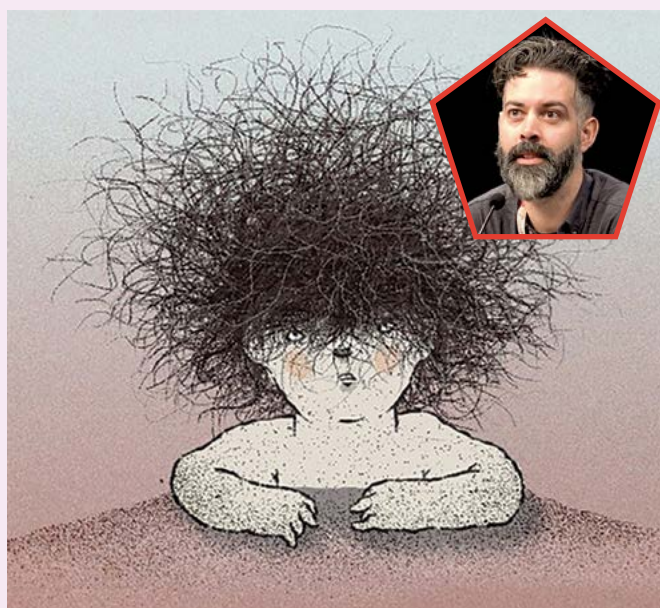
from producers and funds, because the idea wasn't very clear or not very interesting to them. I stopped to count the rejections for funds when I hit 15 rejections!"

Siqueira ended up writing 20 versions of the script. He notes, "In some versions, the child was a girl, then it was a boy. Until I accidentally started to question the gender of the character. I thought, if we don't see the child's body, it should be interesting to play with the gender identity subject. So, finally the gender identity subject was set, with a clear, visceral and imaginative idea! I spent three years studying and interviewing numerous transgender people. One of my biggest inspirations was João W. Nery, the author of the book *Viagem Solitária* (*Solitary Voyage*), which tells the story the first transsexual to have surgical intervention in Brazil, during the military dictatorship regime of the 1970s."

A co-pro between Bando à Parte (Portugal), Rainbow Productions (France) and Ambiances and Luna Blue Film (Belgium), the short was produced using TVPaint and Adobe Animate, with some specific 3D objects done in Maya. Siqueira says one of his biggest challenges was to keep focused and strong during the production phase. "Perseverance plays a big role in completing a short like *Purpleboy*," he admits. "I hope to continue with the same kind of energy for my next projects. That's why when it

comes to advice, I suggest having a lot of perseverance and to push your creativity as much as you can!"

Siqueira, who is a big fan of animation artists such as Igor Kovalyov, Priit Pärn, Roberto Catani and Koji Yamamura, says what keeps him going is the fact that he really values creativity and non-conventional ideas. "An idea is the most important thing, before the beautiful animation or a gorgeous background," he says. "So, that's why I really appreciate it when someone approaches me and asks me about why I wanted to explore a certain idea or show a subject in a certain way." ♦





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A Dream Realized

Taylor Meacham's *To: Gerard* offers a gentle valentine to unselfish acts of love.

Three years ago, Taylor Meacham was working as a production coordinator at DreamWorks Animation, helping to set up the pitches for the studio's newly launched shorts program. The Emerson College grad, who got his foot in the door with an internship at the studio during his senior year, says he was inspired to pitch his own idea for a short after spending time with his dad.

"My father and I would go on these surfing trips to Mexico, and in a lot of ways, he is my best friend," recalls Meacham. "At the time, he was 65, and he was just scraping by because he lost all his retirement savings during the market crash of 2008. It just broke my heart to see him like that, but he told me that he was totally fine, because he had been able to support his children's dreams. That was a profound concept for me, and it inspired me to create a short that cast a light on an act of selflessness. The short's message is that the greatest magic is to inspire someone to follow their dreams, even if you haven't got your own dream realized."

Now after several years of hard work, Mea-

cham's beautifully animated project *To: Gerard* is finally hitting the festival circuit and is one of the selected shorts at the prestigious An-

ry of an older man who has worked at a post office all his life, despite harboring dreams of becoming a magician from a young age. When

a young girl accidentally walks into his life one day, he seizes the chance to pass on the dream with the aid of a special magic coin.

Produced by DreamWorks veteran Jeff Hermann (*Kung Fu Panda 3*, *The Boss Baby 2*) who also oversaw the studio's three other well-received shorts *Bird Karma*, *Bilby* and *Marooned*, the short features beautiful character designs by acclaimed artist Nico Marlet (*Kung Fu Panda* and *How to Train Your Dragon* trilogies, *Abominable*) and music by Layla Minoui.

Hermann says he was very pleased to be able to shepherd these four wonderful shorts over the past few years. "We had this unique moment where things were shifting around and had this window where some crews were available between projects and could focus on our shorts program," he notes. "We pushed for ideas from the crew, and Taylor was the one who made the biggest leap forward. He had the opportunity to be seen as a creative who got this vision accepted and to be able to direct this short

Character design sketches by Nico Marlet



necy festival, being presented online in June. The 7.5-minute short tells the poignant sto-



Visual development
art by Ruben Perez



Taylor Meacham

with a team of about 100."

The producer says *To: Gerard* is by far one of the most joyful and hopeful shorts created at the studio. "It's really a love letter to Taylor's dad for everything that he has done for him and his sister," notes Hermann. "That sentiment came through in his pitch, and I'm very pleased with the way the art and the narrative were able to carry that message forward."

The short's visuals are inspired by some of the director's favorite Art Deco posters and one of his favorite movies, the Coen brothers'

1994 feature *The Hudsucker Proxy*. Meacham explains, "I'm a huge fan of that look. The post office, all the conveyor belts take their visual cues from Art Deco designs. I gave our production designer Raymond Zibach [*Kung Fu Panda* trilogy] all these left-field references and he did an amazing job of bringing that sense of wonder and excitement. Our character designer, Nico Marlet, is so prolific and talented. I went to him with these detailed descriptions of the characters and he came up with these fantastic designs based on those write-ups."

Meacham, who is working as a storyboard artist on the studio's upcoming *The Croods* sequel, says he hopes he will continue to tell stories that will bring hope and joy to audiences. "The short meant a lot for everyone who worked on it. I think all of us were attached to the project emotionally. I know we are living through unexpected, crazy times right now. I am just so happy that my father got a chance to see it during a screening at the studio. Everyone knew who he was and they got to meet him. He was in tears, and that recognition meant a very great deal." ♦

***To: Gerard* is one of the shorts screening as part of Annecy's Competition program online in June.**



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A Time for Growth

Cyber Group Studios' CEO Pierre Sissmann talks to us about the French company's new animated co-pros and plans to target older audiences.

Like many people working in the animation world, Pierre Sissmann has had to adapt to the new post-COVID-19 world over the past few months. But the chairman and CEO of France's Cyber Group Studios says he's moving full steam ahead with a wide variety of animated projects animated at preschool and older audiences, all of which are targeting a growing global appetite for content, with international partners and both linear and streaming entities in mind.

Founded in 2004, Cyber Group has had a long list of global children's hits, including *Zorro: The Chronicles*, *Zou*, *Tales of Tatonka*, *Ozie Boo!* and *The Pirates Next Door*. Last year, the studio had a major hit with its France 5/Disney show *Gigantosaurus*, which has already been greenlit for two more seasons (104 more episodes), and made a big splash with its classic animated show *Taffy* (a co-pro with France TV for Boomerang) and the Brown Bag Studios co-pro *Sadie Sparks* in various territories. According to Sissmann, Cyber Group plans to continue exploring co-production opportunities with studios around the world while expanding its current slate of animated content.

In June, the studio unveiled a new joint venture with Russian animation house Soyuzmultfilm. "We

A New Preschool Label

Sissmann says he and Soyuzmultfilm VP Iliana Yotova had been looking at ways for their two companies to work together over the past three years, and they're both very pleased that they are able to launch this new preschool label. "This marks a diversification of our catalog and a reinforcement of our dedication to our preschool audience worldwide," he notes. "As you know we started with preschool shows, and have had great success with titles like *Gigantosaurus*. So, we hope to continue on this path. One thing that stands out in these new shows is the emphasis on the value of emotions and family life, as well as learning."

One of the other new shows Sissmann and his team are pitching to TV outlets, cablers and streaming entities worldwide is a CG-animated co-pro with Canada's CCI titled *James and the Everafters*.



'One thing that stands out about these new preschool shows is their emphasis on the value of emotions and family life, as well as learning.'

— Pierre Sissmann, CEO and Chairman, Cyber Group Studios



have created a preschool label called Cyber Soyuz Junior and are working on a number of series together. One of our new projects is a 2D traditional animated show called *Orange Moo Cow*, which is a sweet show about a family of cows, and we plan to premiere it at MIPCOM this fall. Another new title is *Squared Zebra*, which centers on a zebra with a square pattern instead of the traditional stripes. This show explores issues of diversity and acceptance from a young person's point of view. Each one of them is 78 x 7 minutes. We will announce two more titles in the near future."

ers, exec produced by Kate Barris (*Hi Opie!*, *Max & Ruby*). "We live in a very tough world today, so I think it's very important to teach kids about compassion, empathy and kindness. This series follows the adventures of a group of misfits who live in a fantasy world and decide to help make the world a better place for everyone," says Sissmann.

Also in the works are a new CG-animated reboot of popular 1990s franchise *Monster in My Pocket* with the original creators MEG (Morrison Entertainment Group) and a series exploring the booming world of esports, titled *Alex Player*. "We're really excited about both of

these titles because they are both quite different in terms of visuals and content, but they explore subjects which are quite attractive for the target audience of six- to 10-year olds," says Sissmann. "The kids at the center of *Alex Player* are engaged in the competitive and exciting world of worldwide video gaming competitions, but they also have to juggle their daily lives at school and home. This 2D-animated comedy-action-adventure show is one of the first to focus on this new world, and it does a great job of exploring issues of trust, teamwork and depending on your peers. We're very pleased to have veteran animation writer and exec producer Mike Yank (*Star vs. the Forces of Evil*, *Harvey Girls Forever*) as the show runner."

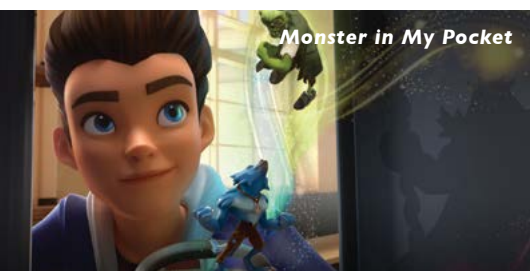
Ecologically Minded Kids

Sissmann points out that *Alex Player* fits in quite well with the studio's mission of reaching out to the tech-savvy young audiences of the 2020s. "The same is true for our other new 26 x 26-minute show *Droners*, which is a co-production with TF1, Supamons, La Chouette Compagnie and Pierre Belaisch's Bee Prod," he points out. "The young characters in that series compete in these exciting drone races, but they are also very concerned about the environment and join forces to save their archipelago from marine submersion."

But wait, there's more! Sissmann says he will announce the launch of several new serialized projects aimed at teens and older audiences in upcoming months. He promises that he will give the scoop to *Animation Magazine* next month, so stay tuned.

"One of the best parts of our job is reaching the public and entertaining animation audiences worldwide," says the seasoned veteran. "I am looking forward to expanding the scope of our reach as we also explore new ways of producing animation, whether it's 2D, CG or real-time. I think the COVID-era taught us new ways of working, but it also forced our employees to take their vacations. Working from home is great, but it's also important to learn to distinguish between work life and home life!" ♦

For more info, visit www.cybergroupstudios.com.



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Surreal Life

Regular Show creator J.G. Quintel explores the hilarious world of a young married couple adjusting to grown-up life in *Close Enough*.

Believe it or not, it has been 10 years since J.G. Quintel's Emmy-winning series *Regular Show* debuted on Cartoon Network. This summer, Quintel is back with a new series that centers on a married couple and their five-year-old daughter and their two best friends/roommates who all live together in a home in the Silverlake neighborhood of Los Angeles. The first season of the series, which is called *Close Enough*, is premiering on HBO Max in July.

The new show, which is produced at Cartoon Network Burbank studios and Saerom Animation (Korea), was inspired by Quintel's own experiences of being a young father and trying to balance work with the commitments of marriage and parenthood. "The idea for the show had been percolating for a while," says Quintel during a recent interview with *Animag*. "As we were wrapping up *Regular Show* in 2017, I was looking for new ideas. The first show coincided with me having a job and being out of college, and *Close Enough* is about getting married, starting a family, trying to buy a house. It's about transitioning from being just yourself and doing whatever you want to taking care of other people in your life."

The show's main character, Josh, is both based on Quintel and voiced by him. Josh and his wife Emily live with two of their best friends who are now divorced, which certainly complicates their daily lives. And although they have encounters with time-traveling snails, stripper clowns and murderous mannequins, there are elements of truth and real experiences in each episode. "Even the building they live in is based on the place I first lived in Los Feliz in L.A.," admits Quintel. "It has the exact same floor plan!"

Triumphant Trailer

Close Enough was originally picked up by TBS in 2017, but it was shelved, and as the stream-



ing wars heated up, the show landed on HBO Max. "We dropped the trailer three years ago, and that's how we actually pitched the series," says Quintel. "We used the same *Regular Show* team and Saerom to create that trailer, and it actually looks like it was put together from a complete show. But it was completely fabricated as a selling tool so that they could see what we were aiming to do. After that, we went through development, and now, after waiting for a long time, it will finally air in July!"

For Quintel, who graduated from CalArts 15 years ago, the series offered a chance to have fun with all the adult subjects he couldn't tackle when he was working on a kids' show.

"We deal with family life and adult situations," he says. "Just because it's an adult show, it's not crass just for the sake of being crass. Yes, we can do that, but I like to be pushed to find creative ways to play with the adult jokes. It's really more about having heart and characters that you care about. The stories have to do with super relatable things, but they all go totally out of control to take advantage of animation and explore things that you can't do in live action."

"I've finally switched over to Storyboard Pro for this show," says the 2D animation die-hard. "I was holding out and using Post-its on paper forever. It's funny, because it has burned into my work habits: I actually draw on the tiniest





iPad now, and I think it works at that size, although digitally you can make it a lot bigger.”

Quintel points out that unlike *Regular Show*, which was a storyboard-driven show, *Close Enough* is a script-driven one, and is written by a team of 10 writers before getting boarded and animated. “I felt like it gave us more control, but we wanted to keep what makes

board-driven shows so alive and interesting to look at in terms of animation,” he explains. “We found a really good balance that makes for a really cool show. The writers’ sole purpose is to crack the story and come up with jokes and punch up scripts and make sure they’re as funny as can be. But on the flip side for the board artists, you can look for people

‘Just because it’s an adult show, it’s not crass just for the sake of being crass. It’s really more about having heart and characters that you care about.’

— Series creator J.G. Quintel



Hairy Situations:
While grounded in reality, *Close Enough* finds comedy in taking its characters to surreal extremes.

who don’t spend as much of their time writing, but focus more on animation and drawing. It’s interesting to have two sets of people who are really strong in their specific fields and combine them together, as opposed to finding people who can do both. Then, you have trade-offs like they’re really funny, but not quite as good at drawing, or vice versa.”

Another big difference is that Quintel and his team have human characters to play with, instead of a blue jay and a raccoon! “In this world, everything behaves more realistically,” says the show creator. “This show is about maintaining a little bit of what was great about *Regular Show*. I really like watercolor backgrounds and things that look realistic, so that hasn’t changed. But as far as making it more palatable for an adult audience, we wanted viewers to see that these are people that they know and could hang out with. So, hopefully that will draw them in, before it gets to the surreal parts! My artistic sensibility hasn’t changed, and even story-wise what I love is taking a mundane relatable situation and ramping it up to 11. Taking it to places where you can’t even imagine.”

The animation veteran says he’s enjoying doing the voice of the main character on this show just like he did with Mordecai on *Regular Show*. “You know my range isn’t that great,” he says with a laugh. “I mean I can kind of do my own voice and that’s about it. So the funny thing is I’m going to keep doing it for this show as well.”

Quintel, who is now putting the finishing touches on the first season of the show, says he thinks it’s amazing that animation is the hottest game in town. “It’s great to see everyone is getting a crack at doing shows, and cool that more and more people are accepting animation as their first choice when they want to watch something,” he says. “Streaming services are gunning for more animation and trying many different things today and are not afraid to venture beyond the old traditional models. I think we’re going to see a lot of cool things that we’ve never seen before.”

He leaves us with these thoughts. “I hope that people who watch our show think it’s a really fun show about things they can relate to in their lives and they can relate to it,” he says. “I always write about my own personal experiences. There’s a lot of that in this show. It’s one of my favorite things when people say ‘Oh that happened to me’ or ‘I know that person’. It’s all about taking situations we have all dealt with and looking at it in a funny way.” ♦

***Close Enough* premieres on HBO Max on July 9.**



Game of Toys

John Harvatine IV and Tom Root share the secrets of making their hilarious new stop-motion series *Crossing Swords*.

John Harvatine IV and Tom Root love playing with toys! The two talented creators of Hulu's hot new stop-motion series *Crossing Swords* are pretty excited to share their project with the world since they've been thinking about doing a show featuring peg toys for a long time.

"One of my first jobs as an animator was working on a Fisher-Price *Little People* TV show," recalls Harvatine. "I was in my 20s, and was kind of bummed because this job wasn't as fun and fulfilling as I thought it would be. So, I found myself daydreaming about these toys doing naughty things to each other. I kept wondering, what if you could take innocent little toys and put them in grown-up scenarios?"

Also playing a key role in the development of the show was Tom Root's whiteboard. "Back in 2011, we had just started Stoopid Buddy Stoodios in Burbank. I'd walk into Harv's office and we'd talk about what kind of shows we wanted to make in the future," says Root. "We thought putting these crude looking children's toys in a fantasy, sword-and-sorcery, medieval setting would be fun."

Root adds, "Because the building was so new, there was this gigantic whiteboard in the writer's room that hadn't been used yet. So, I just started drawing on it — I began by

drawing a castle in the middle of it, and every day I started building out from the center, trying to figure out what else would be on this map. This map kept growing, and we real-

ized there was no end to the stories we could tell: There's a haunted cave in the mountains where all the ghosts and goblins live. There's a forest where the Robin Hood character could

'I found myself daydreaming about these toys doing naughty things to each other. I kept, wondering what if you could take innocent little toys and put them in grown-up scenarios?'

— Exec Producer/Co-creator John Harvatine IV



live. There could be a seaport where you could have pirates.”

Knights, Pirates and Sex Dungeons?

"We could really tell any story we wanted to tell," Root explains. "So, that's what made us most excited to pursue the show. It was a good thing that we were excited about it, because that was in 2011, and here we are in 2020, finally able to get it on the air."

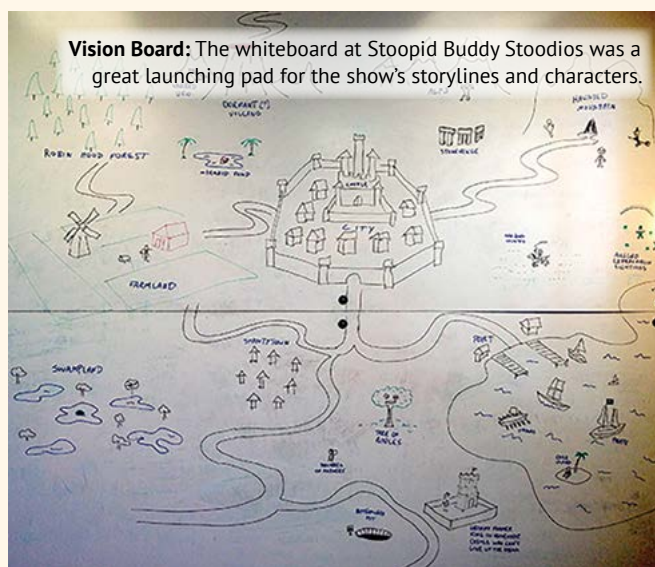
Their much-anticipated show centers on a goodhearted peasant named Patrick (voiced by Nicholas Hoult) who lands a much-sought-after position as a royal castle squire, but soon discovers that his new workplace is a “hornet’s nest of horny monarchs, crooks and charlatans.” *Crossing Swords’* colorful voice cast also includes Luke Evans, Frank Welker, Breckin Meyer, Tony Hale, Hynden Walch, Adam Pally, Adam Ray, Grey Griffin and Jessica DiCicco.

Harvatine and Root, who have received two Emmys and four nominations for their work on *Robot Chicken*, say they're a bit hazy on the exact development timeline of the show because it took a while to get it from the idea stage to finished product. "We partnered with Sony to produce the show, and then after Sony sold it to Hulu to distribute, things happened quickly over the past two years," explains Harvatine, who has worked on shows as diverse as *The Simpsons*, *Captain Underpants*, *SuperMansion* and *Hot Streets*. "Hulu began planning their adult animation master plan,

'Our whiteboard map kept growing, and we realized there was no end to the stories we could tell.'



— **Exec Producer/Co-creator Tom Root**



A Noble Mission: The creative team behind *Crossing Swords* were excited to put all their *Robot Chicken* know-how to explore the comedic potentials of a fantasy epic.

which came to fruition last month with *Solar Opposites* debuting in May." The first season of *Crossing Swords*, comprising 10 half-hour episodes, will arrive on Hulu in June.

The duo praises the work of the show's creative artists who helped craft the look of the show. "Our team, which is led by director of photography Helder K. Sun, art director and production designer John Sumner and animation director Brad Schaffer, has done an amazing job," says Root. "The fact that everything in this world of peg people had to be made out of wood – typically, we use plastic for our stop-motion projects – was a big ask from John. We put these cute little crude characters in environments that make them look real, thanks to Helder's lighting and special angles and lenses. Brad helped us communicate what we wanted to achieve to the animators. They did such a great job that after a few minutes of watching the show, you forget that these props are suspended in air, and you actually start to feel for these little wooden toys and understand their emotions."

Into the Wood

The producers also single out the work of the puppet fabrication (led by Max Shepard) and costume departments (headed by Julia Rosner), which were tasked with creating this massive universe of puppets who are only three inches tall ("Just a little bit shorter than G.I. Joe or Star Wars action figures!"). All the work on the show was

done at Stoopid Buddy's Burbank headquarters – from the writing and designing to the puppet creation, voice recording and VFX work.

Harvatiné says he's pleased to see that primitive toys are gaining popularity in our day and age. "That toy aesthetic of a round head and a peg body has been around for a long time," he says. "We wanted our characters to feel as if they looked like a toy that was around in the 1300s, so that they match the plotlines around them."

Looking back at their creative journey, both Harvatiné and Root are proud of what they've been able to achieve over the past few years. "I'm just glad and relieved that the characters and the comedy that we dreamed up on the page actually work as a TV show," says Root. "I'm pleased that our main character ended up being compelling and likeable. People who gave us feedback on the show told us that they liked going on this journey with Patrick because of his childlike sense of wonder. That's one way the show is different from *Robot Chicken*. For a series, you need to have characters that you'll want to see week after week. It's harder to do, but it's more rewarding when it works ... and more painful when you have to fix it!"

Harvatiné chimes in, "I'm excited about the overall look of the series, that we were able to pull off a show that is made of wood, featuring all the imperfections of the textures. We were able to play with different scales for the characters (bigger versions for the close-ups). The visuals are funny and a little clunky, and all the imperfections make it a fun show to watch. Like *Robot Chicken*, it feels like a show that you can recreate in your own basement, although it takes a few bucks to make!"

Hulu premieres the first season of *Crossing Swords* on June 12.

Toon Trailblazer J.J. Sedelmaier Celebrates a Milestone

Pop culture connoisseurs recognize the amazing JJ. Sedelmaier for his influential *Saturday TV Funhouse* and *The Ambiguously Gay Duo* shorts for *SNL* and producing the first season of MTV's *Beavis and Butt-Head*. But true animation fans know that the talented Mr. Sedelmaier and his wife Patrice are celebrating the 30th anniversary of their New York-based animation/graphic design studio in July. We had a chance to chat with the Annie Award-winning illustrator, designer, author and film director/producer on this special occasion.



Can you tell us a little bit about how you started out in the business?

J.J. Sedelmaier: I think I always knew I wanted to be a part of the art world, especially comic books. From grade school on, I was steeped in drawing and other creative stuff. My mom was a graphic designer/painter and my dad was a filmmaker (he did the "Where's The Beef?" ads). They met at Chicago's Art Institute. So I received plenty of encouragement and support. After I finished college, my strategy was twofold: If I wanted to get into animation, I'd move to the West Coast. If the comic-book industry was what I wanted to explore, I'd move to New York. I had been to NYC visiting relatives just about every Christmas of my life, so I chose NY and comic books. After taking my portfolio around to the few companies in the city, I found that my fantasy bubble of drawing superheroes had popped. Patrice stepped in and encouraged (poked) me to take my work around to more places and people. As soon as I did, I was asked more than once if I was interested in animation... Who *knew* there was animation in NY? It took off from there.

What was your first job in the animation business?

My first studio job was at Perpetual Motion Pictures (Feb. 1981) working as an inbetweener on *Strawberry Shortcake in Big Apple City*. From there, I went to Perpetual Animation, then Buzzco, and then R.O. Blechman's The Ink Tank from May 1984 through 1990. My wife Patrice and I incorporated JJ. Sedelmaier Productions on July 12, 1990.

As you look back, what are the secrets to your success?

Well, first and foremost, having a business partner in Patrice has made the past three decades more worthwhile than anything else I can think of. The level of investment that we have in the company and the industry is unparalleled. Also, our desperate desire to stay at a small, manageable size. It gives you much better control and allows the focus to be on the work as opposed to managing and juggling people. Infinite patience and a basic appreciation of working and collaborating with other people helps most certainly. I get grumpy when the emphasis strays from that and becomes political, etc. There's absolutely nothing better than when you find a partner or partners to play with on a project. Being in sync and acting as a support system for each other is what it's all about! And the other cherished decision we made was to do it in White Plains, NY, close to our home. It gave us so much more control over how Patrice and I could balance our personal and business lives.

What are some of your best career memories?

Too many... but always at the top of the list is all the talented folks I've been able to work with. Whether they're employees, artists, ad agency or network peeps, it's the people you get to spend your time with! Some of the cartoonists and designers I've been lucky to play with are: Al Hirschfeld, Seymour Chwast, Al Jaffee, Don Martin, Patrick McDonnell, Peter de Sève, Bill Plympton, Sue Rose, George Booth, Garry Trudeau, Berkeley Breathed, Lee Lorenz,



Sempé, David Levine, Neal Adams, Ed Sorel, M.K. Brown, Rick Meyerowitz, Lenny Glasser, Lou Myers, Gary Baseman, Guy Billout, Joost Swarte, Barry Blitt ... these are my idols!

What were some of the biggest nightmares?

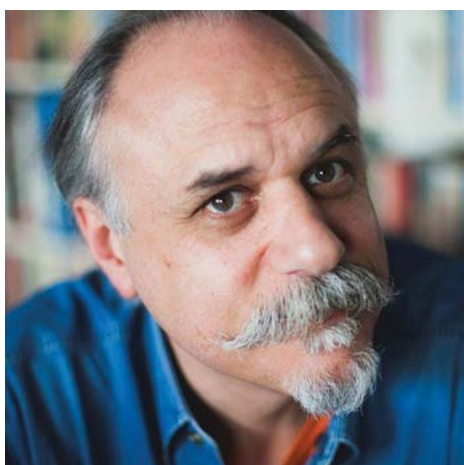
Not too many, really. Doing *Beavis* and expanding from four or five people to 60 was a trip. We found out only after signing on that it had been passed around to just about any studio that would consider it. We were the only ones willing (whacky enough) to take it on, but only because we could do it digitally. I've always been thankful for *B&BH* making us realize so early on that we're a "small studio" kinda company, and not into being big for bigness sake. I've seen so many other studios becoming behemoths and losing sight of their original mission, then imploding.

What are you currently working on?

Finishing up a fourth spot for an award-winning campaign we started two years ago for Regional Hospice in Connecticut. It uses cartoon animation (and even humor), to deal with the difficult subject of hospice care — for old and young candidates.

How do you survive the changing tastes and new technology preferences in the business?

It helps to be known for doing edgy humor and parody. It's also been very handy to have been able to work in any style and/or technique. Through the years, we've done work in



an endless variety of 2D styles, CG, stop-motion and live/animation combos. The work we did with Robert Smigel for *SNL* left us a very special brand.

Favorite animated movies and TV shows of all time?

Films: Disney's *Pinocchio*, *La Joie de Vivre*, *An Optical Poem*, *Yellow Submarine*, *Iron Giant*, *Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse*. TV shows: *Rocky & Bullwinkle*, *Ren & Stimpy*, *South Park*, *Invader Zim* and *Family Guy*. Animation idols: Winsor McCay, E.G. Lutz, Disney, Tytla, Natwick, Tissa David, Dick Williams, Marv Newland, Bill Plympton, Brad Bird, Rebecca Sugar.

Can you offer some advice for animation hopefuls trying to get in the business?

"Don't be a schmuck" (you can quote me...) The industry (and any successful production) depends on collaboration as a key component. You may be God's gift to the world of art, but if no one wants to work with you, all that talent means nothing. And the industry is incestuous, so the word spreads quickly regarding who's a joy to work with, and who's a pain.

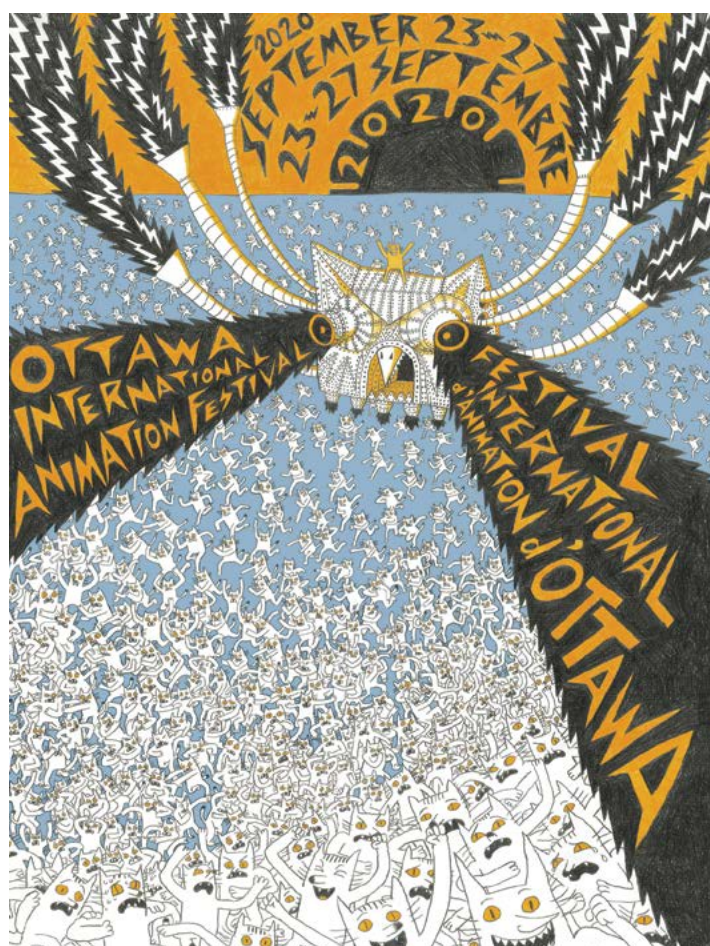
Enter your work into festivals and competition! It's great publicity and PR.

Find the folks who are doing what you consider to be great work, and try to connect. Do your homework though, and be prepared to explain why you dig their stuff *and* what you can conceivably contribute!

Join your area ASIFA chapter and meet the people in the community you ultimately want to be a part of. It's not only your opportunity to meet them, but *their* chance to check you out!

Finally, you can obsess on animation all you want, but also spread your interests and exposure to other realms as well. Film, art, music, history ... you should be as well versed in everything as you can be!

For more info, visit jjsedelmaier.com.





The Game Is On!

French studio Ankama launches a new kickstarter campaign for the fourth season of its popular animated show *Wakfu*.



In the fall of 2008, French studio Ankama (*Motafukaz*, *Dofus*) introduced the animation world to its epic TV series *Wakfu*, which was based on its popular gaming title about a 12-year-old boy with superpowers named Yugo. However, despite a sizeable audience worldwide, the show ended after a shortened third season. Last month, fans were thrilled to find out that the studio has launched a new kickstarter campaign to produce a fourth season of the franchise.

"We never stopped thinking about *Wakfu*," says Ankama's CEO and co-founder Anthony Roux. "The third season was a half season, which was supposed to be continued immediately. However, things did not go as planned. For years our community has been asking us when we would continue telling this epic story, but we couldn't find a network to support the production. We also really wanted to be able to work with one of the networks that supported the first three seasons. But we now feel the time is right. We are ready now."

Roux says the new season of the show will be produced Ankama's studio in Roubaix, France. "Our team of old timers will be joined by a new generation of experts who grew up watching *Wakfu* and are eager to be part of the legend."

A Trailblazing Epic

Ankama's CEO believes the popularity of the show was because the creative team bent a few rules from the start. "At the time, traditional networks were looking for cartoons where every episode was a stand-alone," says Roux. They did not want an episodic content where every episode would build on the previous one. We found a way to satisfy the need for every episode to be enjoyed alone, while telling a bigger story as well."

"Of course we also created nuanced characters who are not what they seem like the main opponent of the first season, Nox, who might seem truly evil on the surface, but has motivations that you can relate to," he adds. "The whole show is about understanding what drives the characters, good or bad, and understanding that nobody is the bad guy in their own stories. Good guys can do bad things, and bad guys can have good reasons to do what they do. Who decides who the heroes are in the end? The show might look like a kids' show on the surface, but the stories definitely treat the audience as smart people."

He also points out that show's production values also played a big role in its popularity.



"We always pushed the boundaries of what you could do in an animated series," notes Roux. "Some of the grand fights you can see at the end of each season are some of the most beautiful, epic, and moving pieces of animations you will ever see on television. We used Flash to animate our series, but because we came from the world of video game, it felt like a natural choice for us."

Roux says like everyone working in the post-COVID-19 world, he and his team had to take measures to ensure the safety and health of his employees. "Most of us started working remotely, and we had to adapt to the new guidelines during the quarantine in France," she points out. "Right now, the quarantine is being slowly lifted, and again we had to take measures so that people who wanted to come back to the office could do it safely. We redefined the spaces, made sure people were working at a safe distance from each other, made masks and gel available, reduced the need for meetings, and defined ways to move around the buildings."

The animation veteran says the industry seems to be thriving currently based on two major factors: "First of all, the arrival of streaming services and the need for original contents allows for a lot more productions to see the light of day," he notes. "Also, the kids who grew up watching cartoons or anime content are now adults, which means that these forms of entertainment are no longer only aimed at kids. You can be much more creative and bold in the way you tell stories. This is a great time to be working in animation!"

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WAKFU, THE SERIES THAT GROWS WITH THOSE WHO LOVE IT

All You Have to Do Is Dream

Media Molecule's hot new *Dreams* title for PlayStation 4 is changing the animation game for at-home enthusiasts.
By Taylor Bayouth

When first-person shooter game *Doom* hit the shelves in 1993, it brought with it the era of the game engine and forever changed how studios recruited and structured their design teams. In the years ahead, the studios that flourished were the ones that moved the software engineers into the same room as the artists, forever raising the bar by necessitating robust physics engines that had not yet been commoditized.

Things stayed like this until 2005, when Unity Technologies set out to “democratize” 3D game development by releasing an engine that was not only accessible to lay programmers like me, but affordable and most importantly, powerful. While Unity has certainly lowered the bar, it has done so incrementally, allowing only the *slightly* less technical in the door.

So why *this* article? Let me first tell you about what I’ve been doing with my life on lockdown. Moreover, what *you* can do with your life on lockdown. It’s a dream we gamers, designers and artists have been dreaming for decades now. And it’s finally come true — it’s even called *Dreams*, and I believe it’s about to change everything.

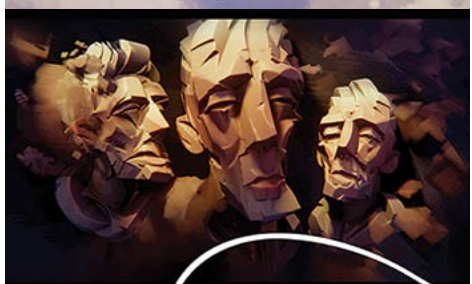
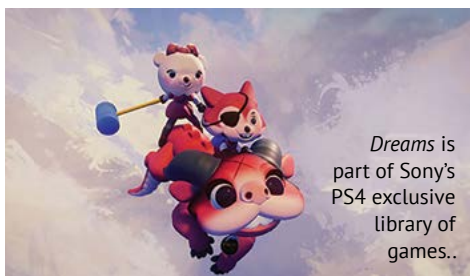
Dreams is a PlayStation 4 exclusive game — created by Surrey, U.K.-based Media Molecule (*LittleBigPlanet*, *Tearaway*), which was acquired by Sony 10 years ago. The game was released this past February after more than a year in early access and seven years of development. In *Dreams*, there are no levels, scores, puzzles, storylines, characters or multiplayer. And you don’t *play* it at all: *Dreams* is a game that lets you make games. It’s a suite of animation, scripting, modeling and sequencing tools that anyone can use to develop unbelievable 3D experiences from the ground up.

Dreams created a lot of buzz at 2018’s E3 after they showed off some of their level-editing and sequencing tools. I remember thinking the claims seemed impossible. Even as I watched a live gameplay demo — a full-featured sculpting suite? Physics, lighting, path-finding and in-built AI? Fully customizable puppets complete with rigging and scripting tools? And what — a community of game-cre-



ators where assets and apparatuses could be created, shared and integrated into your own creations? It all looked and sounded so real.

One of the most exciting things about *Dreams* is getting lost in the Dreamiverse and checking out other people’s creations. You will find everything from a *Sonic*



the *Hedgehog* reboot, to an action space-shooter, called *Blade Gunner*, to a full remake of Hideo Kojima’s *P.T.* — a groundbreaking playable teaser that was suddenly pulled from PlayStation’s network, only to return in the form of a *Dreams* creation by lewisc729.

As Media Molecule’s creative director and co-founder Mark Healey told *Video Games Chronicle*, “Anyone can pick up a puppet and put it on their hand and bring it to life: You can do that in *Dreams*, and that might not be the next big seller, but it makes my son laugh ... So we’ve tried to apply that philosophy to all the tools, to make them playful, so that even if you don’t make something good, the process of making it can be fun.”

Dreams of the Future

If Media Molecule’s *Dreams* has a problem, it’s likely to do with licensing, rising from the sheer number of creations published on their platform on a daily basis. It rings of the early days of YouTube where artists, studios and content owners alike watched as their valuable IP generated millions of impressions *before* moderators could react. At the time it seemed that Google’s \$1.65 billion buyout (pennies by today’s standards!) was an incalculable risk given that no path through this unique licensing fiasco had yet been forged.

The decisions Media Molecule makes in the coming months will tell us a lot about how serious Sony is about *Dreams* as a competitive publisher platform. While *Dreams* is sure to stir up controversy — by enabling gamers to publish their own games without the bottleneck of an internal review process — it has continued to grow and amaze, with Sony doubling down with an additional 10 years added to the *Dreams* roadmap.

With a global virus that has all but cut us off from each other, *Dreams* is a welcome distraction. Whether you are a player or a creator, there is something for you here. And that game that you’ve always wanted to create? Maybe you finally have the tool and the time.

So far, in *Dreams*, I’ve created two full environments, finished animating my characters’ walk cycle, and I’ve just begun to collaborate with two others on a first-person adventure game. I have no idea where this fluke of a project came from, really, or where it’s going. But I can’t stop thinking about what this small team in Surrey, England, has done for gamers who dreamt until they could. ♦

Taylor Bayouth was born in Los Angeles, Calif., where he currently lives with his wife and daughter. On any given day you will find him creating something new — whether it’s art, technology, literature or photography.



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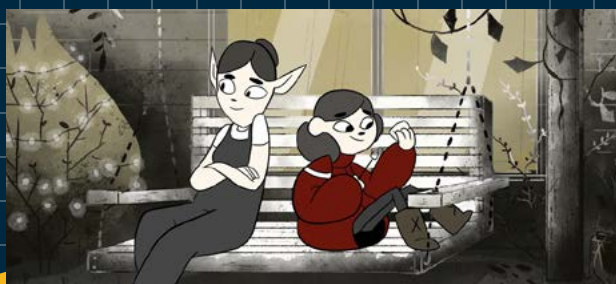
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A Hidden Universe: The team at MPC were tasked with building the technically advanced world of the fairies using blue-screens and digital magic.

How to Spin a Tech-Savvy Fairy Tale

VFX supervisor Charley Henley guides us through the magical world of *Artemis Fowl*.

By Ramin Zahed

About 19 years ago, Irish author Eoin Colfer became a publishing sensation when he introduced readers to the world of *Artemis Fowl*, a young boy who discovers a tech-savvy fairy realm and kidnaps a fairy for a large gold ransom. This summer, audiences will finally be able to see his vision come to life in a lush movie adaptation on Disney+, directed by four-time Oscar nominee Kenneth Branagh. In the film version, Artemis has to come up with a dangerous plan to rescue his father who has disappeared into this fairy realm.

The beautifully mounted feature stars Colin Farrell as the elder Artemis Fowl (dad), Judi Dench as fairy commander Root, Josh Gad as the kleptomaniac dwarf Mulch Diggums and Ferdia Shaw as the young Artemis Fowl. The task of helping bring this cinematic world to life fell upon talented Oscar-nominated VFX supervisor Charley Henley who had previously worked with Branagh on the 2015 live-action adaptation of *Cinderella*. He and his team at Moving Picture Company collaborated with Framestore, Industrial Light & Magic, BUF and RISE to deliver the film's 1,300-plus VFX shots. Argon, The Third Floor and Nvizage were also involved in the project's prework.

"Our first discussions happened in early 2017, when I had just finished working on *Alien: Covenant*," recalls Henley, whose many credits include *The Jungle Book*, *300: Rise of an*



Empire and *Prometheus*. "I was very excited about the project's many creative possibilities and the collaborative nature of working with Ken, because he always stays very engaged with his team. I was also thrilled about the film's mix of real world and fantasy. We generally started out with this premise to connect real-world physics with this magical world of fairies."

Centaurs, Goblins and Gremlins!

The story also helps imagine how the denizens of this fairy world would master new

technologies, far better than humans have. As Henley explains, "We are relating it to the old Irish stories in terms of characters, but also look for real-world situations. What if humans and fairies went their separate ways centuries ago, but they were able to evolve technologically? And how would they use their knowledge today?"

Henley says one of the great aspects of the project was that it allowed the VFX team to explore a full range of methods and techniques to bring the residents of this fairy world, which is called Haven, to life. He says, "We had small gremlins, goblins, gnomes and trolls to create. One of the toughest creatures to do was the centaur character Foaly (Nikesh Patel), which was handled by Framestore. We looked at other centaurs in other movies and TV shows, but we wanted something with a quirkier angle. We based our Foaly on a young horse – a foal – because the proportions match the human body better. One of the guys on the team had a young horse, so they ended up analyzing its anatomy. We built some rises for him and put a small butt on him where his backside would be. The actor had to train to move like a horse, and we tweaked the proportions to make it all feel and look natural."

The giant troll that crashes into the Fowl Manor was another one of the film's VFX highlights. Henley explains, "The troll is all CG, but we needed a real-world physical presence on



the set so that our young actors would be physically chased by it. That was very useful. So, we had a large 12-foot-tall puppet built so that Ken could direct it live on the set, instead of a tennis ball as reference. There's also a scene in the village with this crowd, and it's difficult to make a large group of extras interact with the monster if they don't see it. But this puppet lent to the chaos of the whole scene, running around chasing people. One puppeteer operated its head and feet and two others controlled its arms, when we needed the arms."

Creating the film's goblins also presented the team with some challenges. "Our prosthetics supervisor Kristyan Mallett and his team did a nice job of creating these prosthetic masks for the characters," says the VFX supervisor. "We then replaced the prosthetics with CG versions of their faces in the close-up shots. Adrian Scarborough, who played the Goblin King, performed the facial expressions, and we got all the details back on the faces. So, it was a nice crossover between

practical and CG effects. The gremlins in the movie are all CG-animated as well. However, we made little physical costumes for them as reference for the CG clothing. They are these small, fantastical creatures that run around this fairy world playfully, so we wanted them to be wearing outfits that were stolen clothes from people."

"We wanted the fairies' technology to have a fairly organic and naturalistic look to it, so we visualized it based on network patterning and brain synapses."

— Visual effects supervisor Charley Henley

Home Sweet Haven

The toughest location to create was the film's fairy Haven. Parts of it were built on set, and others were built on exterior sets in Ireland, so there were a lot of different pieces to bring together. "The big challenge involved a long connecting shot which you travel through to find this place, and there was so much evolution of design to go into that," says Henley. "Creating the look of the fairy's technology

also took a lot of work. We wanted it to look interesting and original. For example, Foaly the Centaur's office has all this elaborate fairy tech in it. We filmed it in a fairly simplistic set, which allowed us to fill the room with CG fairy technology afterwards. We wanted their technology to have this organic and naturalistic look to it so we visualized it based on network patterning and brain synapses."

Henley also gives a lot of credit to the previs work done by Argon, The Third Floor and Nvizage. "We worked with these three previs companies and they used the Unreal game engine, which has a lot of real-time and VR functions," he notes. "For example, when the Haven set was being built, Ken could look at the set with a VR headset in the office. It wasn't a full-blown virtual production, but it gave our director and production designer [Jim Clay] access to the set in an immersive way. Ken could go in and move around Haven as we built it and decide which angles and what kind of shots he wanted and plot them all out."

This virtual walk-around was also translated into an iPad application, which the filmmakers or the actors could check out on the set to see what it would look like after it was completed. "On some of the sets we could also design drone moves by flying around the sets," adds Henley. "The iPad could plot out the drone moves and then communicate that with the drone pilots and design shots before we shoot them."

"I'd worked on *The Jungle Book*, which had a large virtual production, and they used that technology extensively on *The Lion King* as well," he notes. "I borrowed some of those ideas to allow the filmmakers to have the same type of virtual toolsets, which have now become flexible enough to use. In the past, it was either a full virtual set or traditional previs. This kind of brought the two worlds together."

Looking back at his *Artemis Fowl* experience, the VFX pro says he looks forward to seeing it again. "I enjoy watching it in its different iterations. I never get bored. There's always something entertaining to see. It goes back to the mix of different people we had and seeing their work again. Hopefully, the amount of creative input that came from such a talented VFX crew will be obvious to see on the screen. It's truly the sum of all the parts," concludes Henley. ♦



Artemis Fowl will premiere exclusively on Disney+ on June 12.

Tech Reviews

by Todd Sheridan Perry



iZotope Dialogue Match

Every couple of years or so, I have to remember that half of a movie is sound – especially for animation and visual effects. So, whether you are a pro sound designer (who



probably would be familiar with these tools already) or you are working on your own animation project, you should be aware that sound tools have been advancing at the same rate as the visual tools have.

The tools we are looking at today are all from a company called iZotope. They make standalone products as well as plugins for a slew of DAWs (Digital Audio Workstation) like Ableton, Cubase, Logic Pro X and Pro Tools, among others. They span from music production to post-production. I'm going to focus on post-production tools, and more specifically on audio mixing and repairing tools. Starting with Dialogue Match.

I'm more of a visual guy. My eye is tuned way more than my ears are. So, when I have dialogue tracks that have been recorded at different times, different places, even the same audio recorded with different mics – on-set audio versus in a recording suite doing ADR (Automated Dialogue Replacement – far from “automated”, BTW) – I know that these all sound different from one another, but I wouldn't know where to start to attempt to match them up. Dialogue Match is a Pro Tools plugin for tackling this specific problem.

The process goes something like this: You take the audio that you think is the best; the one you want everything else to match to. Dialogue Match analyzes the clip and creates a profile that includes the EQ, the Ambience and the Reverb. You then feed in a clip that you want to match. That one also gets analyzed, and Dialogue Match makes adjustments to shore up the differences. Once that process is complete, you are provided controls to finesse just how much

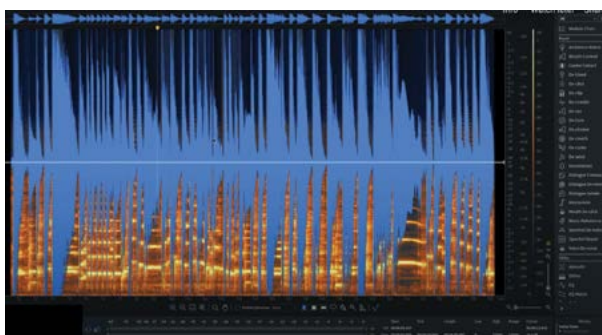
of each component you want to use.

I can't adequately express to you the heartache and frustration you can avoid using this. I was able to take voice over recorded in eight different settings and match them. I found that some pre-repair was required in RX 7 (see the RX 7 review below) to make the clips sound the best they could be, and then Dialogue Match was the last step in the process to nudge all of the clips together so they sounded like they were all recorded in the same place in the same session.

At \$600 it's not an insignificant investment. But if you are mixing a lot of dialogue, your ROI just based on your time spent is going to make up for it.

iZotope RX 7

In the Dialogue Match review, I mentioned that I did a “pre-repair” or “pre-clean” on the dialogue before matching them. To do this, I used RX 7, which is a powerful set of tools within a standalone product, but through RX Connect, can be launched from your DAW, and the result is brought back into the mix. The idea behind RX 7 is that you build up a “module chain” of effects as you repair the audio. Think of it as a stack in 3ds Max, a list of effects in After Effects or a series of nodes in Houdini. The process can be repeated for oth-



er clips. And you can go up the chain to make adjustments.

There are a *lot* of tools in RX 7, which vary depending on whether you have Elements, Standard or Advanced, and I can't go through them all – so I'll look at the most recent and most powerful.

First, RX 7 has a Repair Assistant. This is a helper that analyzes the audio clip, searching for the most common issues – noise, clipping,

clicks, pops, etc. It listens to the clip and then makes three suggestions of how to fix the clip. This can be chosen for music or dialogue (which have different repair considerations). You can audition different versions and choose the clip you like best and render it out, or you can opt to open the module chain that Repair Assistant created under the hood and begin to customize it to your liking. This is great for processing *a lot* of audio, pushing them closer to where they need to be.

Dialogue Contour is another kinda magical module. There are numerous cases where you want to modify the speaker's intonation. Sometimes you are stitching together dialogue from multiple takes (Franken-editing) where the energy and inflections don't match. Or, perhaps, the speaker is emphasizing in odd places or they simply rise at the end of each phrase, like it's a question. In Dialogue Contour, you load in the clip and using a curve (like you would for animation or adjusting volume or opacity), you can sculpt the tone of the delivery.

Dialogue De-reverb and Dialogue Isolate work in similar ways, utilizing machine learning to identify dialogue against an environment's reverb qualities. Or, in the case of Dialogue Isolate, separating the dialogue from complex background noises like clanging plates, aircraft, cars, etc. Dialogue De-reverb is different from other de-reverb plugins in that

it doesn't need a clean source of the ambient reverb to subtract from the clip you want to fix. And Dialogue Isolate is required when you need to separate the voices in order to process them along and mix in Foley afterwards.

Other crazy productive modules include a slew of other “de-” tools: clicks, clipping, hum, noise, bleed, crackle, plosives, ess-es and rustles. And that's hardly the end of it.

Again, these are problem-specific tools, so the cost isn't necessarily democratized. But iZotope does offer three different versions of RX 7, ranging from \$129 for Elements (which gives you a number of the “de-” modules) on up to \$1,199 for Advanced, which has *everything*.

All products and more info available at izotope.com.

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For the love of television

Tips for Thriving as a Work-at-Home Animator

The world has changed seemingly overnight. While working from home may not be new to some, for others this change may have come as a jolting dislocation. Whether you are seeking a full-time or part-time remote position at a company or trying to win contracts as an independent animator, here are a few tips to guide you along the way during this work-from-home climate shift:

Job Boards

Everything from full-time positions to short-term gigs can be found on dozens of different job boards, so sign up on every one you can find.

There's nothing quite like automatically receiving job leads in your email while you sleep, waking up to find them waiting for you. While mainstays like creative-heads.net or monster-jobs.com attract a lion's share of attention from job seekers, there are plenty of others out there, so spend the first part of each work day seeking out and registering on new job boards until your inbox is overflowing with possibilities.

Direct Email

If you are more of the entrepreneurial spirit and want to find new projects and clients autonomously as opposed to working for someone else, never underestimate the power of a short email.

Find the email addresses of potential clients and send them a quick note telling them that you provide professional animation services and provide them with a link to your portfolio. "Please contact me if you are interested in finding out more or if you have any questions." That's it! Anything more in a cold email will come across too salesy and may even get caught in spam filters, to be read nevermore.

Streamline Your In-House Rendering

Rendering is perhaps the single greatest bottleneck in 3D animation. Untold resources are of-

ten required to render a single shot, not to mention an entire project. However, if you work efficiently, even the most modest of home studio render farms can yield great results.

The Golden Rule of Rendering: Render only what is absolutely necessary and composite the rest. For some of you this may seem fairly obvious, but for others it may come as a wakeup call.

For example, if the camera and background are still throughout a shot, consider rendering a single background frame for the entire sequence instead of rendering the foreground and background together for the full frame range.

Additionally, do as much work as possible in your 2D image editing program of choice instead of relying fully on 3D animation software to get the ex-

of high end processors, all working together to crank out your finished frames in a matter of hours or even minutes. Be sure to allocate budget for this option up front, as paying to have a bunch of complex frames rendered in a hurry can add up in a hurry.

Delivery

Chances are, the files you need to send to your clients are too large to safely fit within email constraints. Even if you normally have no problem sending 20 MB files through email, there's no guarantee that your client is able to receive them with the same ease.

If your submittal gets lost in email limbo and your client doesn't receive it due to mail server

issues, to them it's the same as you not delivering in the first place and the excuse, "It's your email server's fault, not mine!" won't suffice.

Because you need to deliver on time every time, absolutely under no circumstances should you leave your livelihood up to the whimsy of email servers. Instead, use a third party file transfer service. Some of them may even have a free option, allowing you to send large files at no cost.

Whether you go with a free option or premium membership, be sure the service does not require your client to install or sign up for anything to be able to download your files. Any speed bump or added responsibility whatsoever that a client must endure due to working with you will make said client not want to work with you much longer.

In today's climate, many clients' tensions are high and their futures may seem uncertain, so it is crucial to be more professional, confident and accommodating than ever. ♦



Martin Grebing is the president of Funnybone Animation Studios. He can be reached at www.funnyboneanimation.com.



Easily distracted at home, Homer Simpson may not be able to get a lot of work done from home.

act look and feel that you want. Forgo the idea of creating the most perfect six-layer shader ever seen, as it will take five times longer to develop and 10 times longer to render than needed. Instead, focus on developing the look and feel as much as possible within the 2D bitmap texture. This can save massive production and rendering time. Apply this concept for lighting, effects, and more.

Outsource Rendering as Needed

If you have a project that is simply too massive to render in-house, no matter how much you've streamlined your process and how well you've planned ahead, take a breather – there are several dependable render farms available as needed, 24/7. These render farms can consist of hundreds

Be Afraid of a Vengeful Teenager!

By Charles Solomon

SSSS.Gridman: The Complete Series

Funimation; two discs, Blu-ray (\$39.99)
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SSSS.Gridman (2018) is an animated reworking of the live-action tokusatsu (special effects heavy) TV series *Denkou Choujin Gridman* (Gridman the Hyper Agent, 1993-1994). Tsuburaya Productions, who made the original program, collaborated with Studio Trigger (*Promare*, *Little Witch Academia*) on this reboot. The “SSSS” stands for “Special Signature to Save a Soul,” but it’s also a reference to *Superhuman Samurai Syber-Squad* (1994), the American version of *Hyper Agent* by Tsuburaya, Ultracom and DIC.

Red-haired Yuta Hibiki (Brandon McNinis) seemed like an ordinary high school student – until he turned up on the doorstep of his classmate Rikka Takarada (Jill Harris), suffering from amnesia. Although he can’t remember much of anything, Hibiki can see an enormous *kaiju* (monster) looming over the city. When he tries to warn them about the menace, neither Rikka nor his fanboy best friend Sho Utsumi (Greg Ayres) have any idea what he’s talking about. They don’t see anything.

But they experience the chaos that ensues when the monster attacks their school and the surrounding city. The trio takes refuge from the destruction in Rikka’s mother’s second-hand shop; their presence triggers a dusty old computer Rikka’s dubbed “Junk.” Hibiki sees the robotic Hyper Agent Gridman (Robert McCollum) appear on the scratched-up monitor. Gridman tells Hibiki they must fuse to fight the *kaiju*, and sucks him into the computer terminal.

After they defeat the monster, Hibiki is puzzled that the buildings they crushed seem to have regenerated. There’s no sign of damage anywhere. No one else knows the monster attacked, and kids who were killed in the fray

have vanished from their classmates’ memories.

When Rikka and Utsumi develop the ability to see and hear Gridman, Utsumi declares they now constitute the Gridman Alliance, and will continue to battle the mysterious *kaiju* whenever they appear. Each monster is stronger and stranger than the previous one, and the battles grow more intense – Gridman and Hibiki fight with their backs to the wall and even lose one encounter. Hibiki fears that the monsters could actually be humans, and he’s terrified that he might inadvertently commit murder. He’s an even more reluctant combatant than Simon in *Gurren Lagann*.

Fortunately, four odd-looking people appear and join the Gridman Alliance. The NGHS (Neon Genesis Junior High Students) are manifesta-

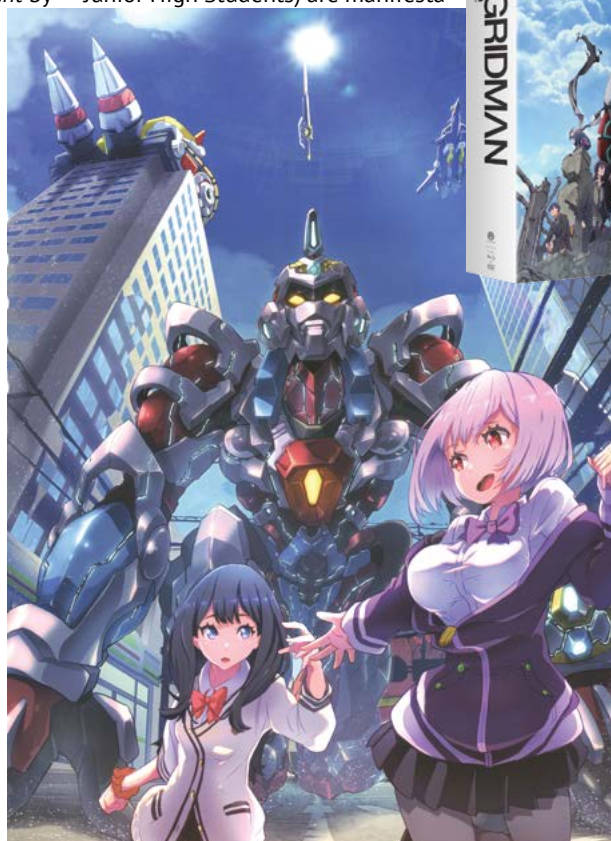
grow increasingly fantastic, the trio learns that the *kaiju* are being created by their weird fellow-student Akane Shinjo (Lindsay Seidel). She sculpts a *kaiju* in clay; her ally, digital being Alexis Kerib (Barry Yandell), brings it to life to attack students and teachers who have annoyed Akane. They’ve also created Anti (Stephen Fu), a sentient *kaiju* who takes the form of a boy, but who can copy Gridman’s powers – until he runs out of energy. (Akane under-feeds him.)

Directed by Akira Amemiya and written by Keiichi Hasegawa, *Gridman* often evokes Hideaki Anno’s watershed series *Neon Genesis Evangelion*, especially in the hand-to-hand

combat scenes between Gridman and the bizarre-looking monsters that reduce the surrounding cityscapes to rubble. But the filmmakers deliver the evocations with a knowing wink, and the designs of some of the *kaiju* reference the low-budget Japanese monster movies of the 1950s.

One major problem limits *Gridman*’s appeal: the weakness of the villain. The battle animation, the scale of the threat and the intriguing designs all demand a more powerful and interesting mastermind than a snotty teenager who’s seeking vengeance for some imagined slight. Creating a monster to kill a good teacher who accidentally brushed against her while checking his phone feels like a ridiculous response to nothing much. Gridman’s formidable battle skills should be pitted against an evil genius, not a petulant brat...

Gridman offers the bold colors and imaginative graphics that have become Trigger’s signature, but everything has been toned down a bit. The series still hits the viewer with more energy and excitement than the average anime adventure, but it’s not as over the top as their popular *Gurren Lagann* (2007). ♦



This month, we visit the talented **Joanna Lewis** and **Kristine Songco**, story editors on DreamWorks' *Kipo and the Age of Wonderbeasts* (season two begins June 12 on Netflix) and co-exec producers on *Jurassic World: Camp Cretaceous* (arriving on Netflix later this year).



KS: Wake up, choose from an assortment of comfy shirts that are technically pajamas but passable as work attire.



KS: Take my dog, Ponzu, on a walk – complete with matching masks. (He wears his differently than me.



JL: Trying to stay safe and fit/ burn off all my "Sanity" Cocktails!



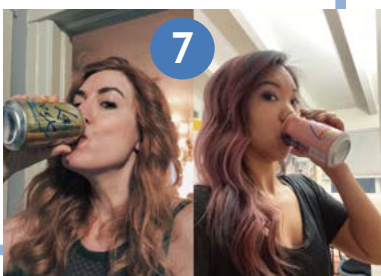
KS: "Clean" my room in case it shows up in the background of video chats.



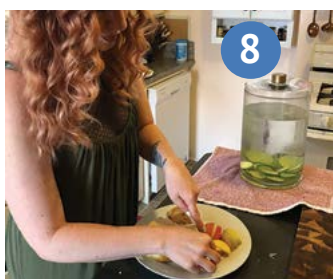
JL: I hate folding laundry – sometimes the pile gets big!



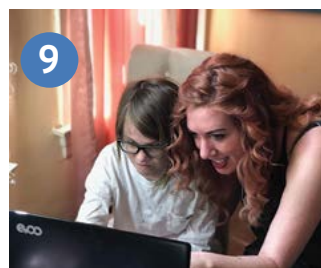
JL: Sometimes it's hard to come by paper towels in quarantine – I said, "Not in my house." (Actually, I thought this was toilet paper. We were desperate and I spent \$45 dollars on this)



KS & JL: Take a La Croix break and pretend that we're together :)



JL: Making lunch!!!



JL: Helping with homework – you can tell how much she LOVES it when I help.



JL: Comforting my daughter after the internet goes out.



JL: Making those cocktails!!!



KS: FaceTime our trainer so we can do "quarantraining."



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